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THE MOURNERS

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MARY MURRY



PETER NEVILL

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That dont sound like good sense. What would he want
to look at a rainbow for?

The Sheriff, in *The Shewing Up of Blanco
Posnet*, by George Bernard Shaw.

Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom
Remember us—if at all—not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men.

T. S. Eliot.

I

THE LAST clod was cast and the last flower strewn: the priest and the undertaker's men had withdrawn and with them the onlookers, for now that it was all over there was no sense in standing about in the damp.

Only the mourners remained. There were four of them, one at each corner; four solitary, uneasy strangers, covertly eying, appraising, confronting one another in the silence which closed in upon them and drowned even thought. They who had everything to say avoided speech. They hung on together, resenting and resisting still this thing which had brought them at last face to face. It bound them, yoked them, and none of them cared to own to anything in common with the others. Yet here they were, inescapably, for it was going to be impossible to break away without at least acknowledging one another's presence, impossible to leave the place without even speaking. The conventions had them trapped, and there was no way out.

Charles was the first to stir. Tentatively he put on again his soft hat, which was exactly the right shape for so delicate an occasion, and perfectly crowned his decent but non-committal mourning. Furtively he slipped back his smooth cuff and, fortified by the sight of his wrist-watch ticking away steadily, normally, indifferently, he cleared his throat rather like a boy soprano before the ordeal of a solo anthem in a hushed, expectant congregation. "There's quite a good train back to town at two-fifty, so they tell me," he announced as casually as he could.

But his thinly wavering words had no conviction to carry, only embarrassment, and once more the clamorous silence surged and tumbled about their ears, while the pregnant stillness gathered fresh momentum.

Until Christopher, who could bear it no longer, acquiesced in a grey, flat tone that fell away on the wind: "I suppose we may as well take it."

And quick relief ran through the four of them.

The big man put on his hat again too, quieted his fumbling fingers and stamped flabbily upon the gravel as though it were winter. "Might as well," he reverberated breathily with the hang-dog look of resignation that he considered appropriate to the occasion. "Tch! Tch! Tch! Might as well." On arrival he had characteristically commandeered the only hired car down from the station, but now he fell in on foot behind the others.

As for Nicholas, it hadn't occurred to him to wear mourning, and anyway he possessed no hat at all. As he moved off he ran his fingers through his wet hair, and Christopher alone noticed how nearly he contrived to make his coat-sleeve brush across his eyes.

It was inevitable that the two of them should walk back to the station together, leaving Charles and the big man to straggle after. Not that there could ever be any question of forgiveness between them on the face of things: yet, in spite of everything, each was conscious of an under-current, an interchange of unspoken sympathies, so that at this, their first encounter, each felt it in him to wish the past away and to make a new beginning.

But the past was no corpse to be buried. It confronted Christopher, who belonged to the place, at every step between the dripping June hedgerows that led back to the station. It rose to meet him from the hollow oak and the masses of starry, white Jack-in-the-Hedge. And between the elms he could even catch a glimpse now and again of

the chalk-pit, the open white sore in the plump green flesh of the Downs. They all saw it, but were careful to look away, and say nothing.

• The sun shone steel-blue again on the wet tarmac before them, and the four of them walked mutely on beneath the fitful leaf-trickles—Christopher and Nicholas, Charles, and last of all the big man who had become unused to walking, urging himself into something between a strut and a waddle. None of them looked back at him, and as they progressed their separate silences deepened and hardened like earth-fissures in a drought. It was only in the train, when they had settled four-square together again, in the corners of their compartment, that speech began to seep through.

Nothing, except his own company, dismayed Charles so much as silence. It was something he couldn't take. So for the sake of saying something he hazarded: "By the way, is anything being done about a headstone?" He was trying still to sound quite casual about it all.

The big man, who couldn't abide silence either and had never tried his own company, was quick to respond. He was even grateful. "A memorial, gentlemen?" he broke in. "I'm taking care of that. Been thinking about it all the way back, as a matter of fact. All the way back." He leaned expansively towards the others, his fat, over-manicured fingers spread over his knees, and went on slickly in the half-menacing, half-wheedling tone he used for putting forward his business propositions: "Now what would you say to a scroll of best quality white marble with nice gilt lettering, supported by, say, a couple of life-sized angels, eh? Eh?"

Completely at his ease in the uncomfortable silence which followed, Nicholas clasped his hands behind his head and stretched out to the full his lean length. "How large exactly are life-sized angels?" he enquired with a

deathly detachment. "Does anyone know?" He surveyed each one of their startled faces in turn, blandly, with his sardonic half-smile, and then closed his eyes leaving the relentless beat of the wheels on the metals to ram home his words: Does anyone know? Does anyone know?

The big man concealed his annoyance by looking injured. Charles glanced sideways at Nicholas, wondering nervously to what indecorous lengths his neighbour's raging, impotent bitterness might run. Christopher, in his gentle way, resumed:

"But don't you think a group like that would be rather—well, rather extravagant?"

The big man took this as a challenge. "Oh, at my own expense, of course! At my own expense!"

Christopher swallowed his distaste. "It wasn't the expense I was thinking of," he pursued, slowly, clearly, above the beating of the wheels, "but simply that it's all much too elaborate. Pretentious. I just can't see her with scrolls and gilt lettering and marble statuary."

"Ostentatious, don't you think?" Charles contributed helpfully with his awkwardly schoolboyish good-humour.

"Like orchids on a coffin," Nicholas slipped in maliciously from his corner.

"Oh, come, now," protested the big man, feeling himself attacked once more and looking to the others for support. "Orchids were her favourite flowers. Favourite flowers. And we all know she was fond of nice things, pretty things—jewels and furs and perfumes and all the rest of the fal-lals that cost a lot of money and they all adore, eh? Eh? And I saw she had 'em, too!" He beamed at them in what he hoped was a disarmingly swash-buckling sort of way, and offered round his cigars, but they all refused—even Christopher—and he looked no more, no less than he was, a pathetically vulgar old man who had trampled his way to the top of the show business.

Charles stared back at him with prim disdain for the hopeless outsider. "That's hardly the woman I remember, sir. She ~~did~~ have breeding however—er—however frail and foolish she might have been."

To show his unconcern the big man lit a cigar. "She was a high-stepper all right," he remarked, heavily sly. "But then you never got under the skin, old boy. You never got under the skin!"

Charles was sitting opposite him, fortunately out of reach of the nudging elbows, the indecently prodding forefinger. "I resent that remark, sir," he began, red as a mullet, but Christopher intervened: "Gentlemen, gentlemen, we were discussing the memorial, and I think it would be unseemly in us all to go farther."

He was looking down at the clay, fresh on his shoes, and the others followed his glance.

The sudden scarlet drained again from Charles's fine pink skin and the big man stirred in his corner, muttering and sighing to himself. He cast away his newly-lit cigar and his fingers began to work again on his handkerchief as they had in the churchyard. His murmurings became articulate. "Wouldn't have had it happen for a million dollars! Not for a million dollars!"

For Christopher the train wheels beat on inexorably: Orchids on a coffin. Orchids on a coffin. Orchids on a coffin. Until Nicholas leaned forward and touched his knee.

"What did she really like?" he said.

Christopher was so surprised, so confused and gratified by this flash of sincerity that he could only say: "You must have known her best. Of the four of us."

"But you knew her first," Nicholas responded. "You were children together."

Children together. In the lane that led up from the churchyard between the summer hedgerows. Christopher

said at last: "The white, starry-looking flowers in the hedges. Those are what she liked."

"Those? She should have had them, then. Why couldn't you have said so before it was too late?"

"They're only wild."

"They're hers, and she should have had them."

"Of course."

All his life Christopher had seen things just too late, and now it had happened once again. Ironically, as always, memories rushed in upon him in futile confirmation.

"She even said so herself once. When we were children. I remember now. We were arguing about a nest we'd found in that same hedgerow. She would insist it was a linnet's and I said they didn't build there, and when she saw I was getting the best of it she suddenly pulled a great armful of the white flowers and said: I'd like a bouquet of these for my wedding—and some on my coffin too. I was angry with her for backing out of the argument and so I said: How d'you know you'll ever get married? And she said: P'raps I won't die either—just to spite you!"

Nicholas smiled. "That was Una," he said.

"Wimbledon!" sighed the big man contentedly from his corner. He nodded across at Christopher. "Damn good train this. Glad you put us on to it. No sense in hanging about, once it's all over. Especially in the rain. Tch! Tch! Tch! Just look at it! Teeming down."

But nobody looked.

"Damn good train," he repeated, losing confidence.

"Think I'll make that conference after all."

"It's the best train up of the day," Christopher agreed, glad of some remark to ease the threatening silence. "We

always used to wonder why they ran it so late in the afternoon. It was never any good for a day in town."

"Quite so, quite so," said the big man jovially, getting back into his element. With the country well behind him he felt himself once more the Big Man, the man who mattered, the man whose absently murmured "Quite so, quite so" meant so much more than his "Not for a million dollars!" of an hour ago. And as the train pulled in, the station loud-speaker blatantly welcomed him back into his own.

Nicholas rose abruptly and left the compartment.

"Leaving us here?" the big man called after him, genially, superfluously.

From the corridor Nicholas replied: "I'm walking across the common and taking a 'bus back to town." But he perfectly conveyed that he was leaving them because the compartment stank. He looked at Christopher. "Coming?" he said.

Again taken by surprise Christopher got to his feet and began to grope wildly for his belongings, hat, gloves, umbrella, while Nicholas, his hands in his pockets, stepped out on to the platform. The whistle blew and the train began to move. A porter slammed the door in Christopher's face. The train gathered speed. His possessions clasped to him, Christopher stood lurching helplessly at the corridor window while Nicholas disappeared up the concrete stairs on his way out. Christopher made his way back to his seat.

"Missed your chance, eh?" the big man welcomed him, fatuously indulgent. "Well, it's no great loss. Queer kind of guy, that," he went on at large. "No hat, no coat, and out he goes in the rain. But they're most of 'em that way inclined. Temperament. That's what it is. Never know which way they'll jump next."

"Actor, what?" observed Charles sagely.

"Nicholas Quin," the big man went on carelessly, now at peace with all the world. "Run up against him once or twice myself. Professionally, I mean, of course. Got something all right, but won't ever get anywhere with it. No common sense. Know him at all?"

"No," said Charles, cryptically tragic. "But I've very good reason to remember him."

"Oh, I see," said the big man expansively. "Oh, I see. So you're the husband."

"If you don't mind," said Charles, drawing a transparent veil over his wounds, "we won't speak of it."

"No, of course we won't, of course we won't," the big man assured him, dwelling heartily upon it. "Painful subject, eh? Painful subject. Let bygones be bygones, that's what I always say. Let bygones be bygones!" He leaned forward, roundly confidential. "Came to me from him, y'know. Oh, yes. Treated her shamefully. Shamefully! Poor little woman!" He subsided once more into his corner with a grunt of virtuous satisfaction.

Christopher was gravely watching the narrow suburban gardens go by, each with its square of lawn backed by the creosoted trellis and arch of crimson ramblers, and its inevitable bird bath or lily pond set with plaster pixies and hideously enamelled gnomes. As they gave way to the sooty wash-house walls of Brixton, whose yellow bricks were garlanded with zinc tubs and rusty cycle frames, the big man observed with glee: "Not even stopped at the Junction!"

He turned to Christopher again. "And where do you come in?" he asked. "Can't say I ever heard her mention you."

"I?" said Christopher, startled from his window-gazing.

"Not her brother, are you?" the big man went on uneasily. "Or a relative of any sort?"

Her brother. So that was how he appeared even to this

gross, obtuse-minded stranger who had never seen them together, never set eyes on him until after she was dead. Until the coroner's court.

• "What makes you think I'm her brother?" Christopher flung at him. "Her name wasn't Hayward."

Christopher's resentment amused the big man. It gratified his vanity. But he answered mildly enough: "Never take much notice of second names. You don't in my profession. Maiden names, married names, stage names—only the first names stay the same. So you're not a relative at all?"

"A friend, like the rest of you."

But the big man would give him no peace. "Oho, like the rest of us, eh? Now a friend can mean a heck of a lot of things, y'know, a heck of a lot of things." He winked across at Charles. "Don't you agree? Don't you agree?"

Charles countered him coldly. "I married her," he said.

"Divorced her too, after she—after the Nicholas Quin business, eh?"

"There was nothing else for me to do," said Charles with wounded dignity.

"But he never made an honest woman of her, did he, eh?"

• "What she chose to do with her freedom was no concern of mine. From that day on I washed my hands of her."

"Yet here you are today, just like the rest of us," Christopher observed.

"Just like the rest of us," the big man repeated after him, his unease of the country churchyard once more upon him. And to Charles's extreme embarrassment and disgust he leaned laboriously towards him and patted his hand.

"We're all in the same boat," he said. "All in the same

boat"—and he heaved one of his prodigiously far-fetched sighs—"whether we like it or not."

The train glided to a standstill.

"Waterloo!" he cried, taken unawares, and he struggled joyously to his feet. "Just make that conference! Hey, taxi! Taxi! He's stopping for me. No, he ain't! Yes, he is! Bit of luck, that. Right alongside. Broadway House, driver. As fast as you can make it, and then some! Hey, wait a minute!" He stuck his head out of the taxi window and shouted to Christopher who was next out of the train: "Hey, you two! Don't want to lose touch with you! Lot to talk about! That memorial, y'know. Value your opinion. Contact me at Broadway House, eh? Earl P. Grossman of Broadway House. Got it? Earl P. Grossman." And he sank back at last, content, upon the upholstery.

Charles joined Christopher on the platform and they both stood watching the taxi slide from the station gloom out into the murk of the weather. To help tide over the pause, the inertia which followed upon the big man's departure, Christopher said: "Funny how bad weather levels the seasons in London. In the country, summer rain is always summer rain, but here it might be November."

"Dirty old London," said Charles brightly, supposing a response was necessary. And he grinned his old, popular, rather nice schoolboyish grin. He was once more himself, now that the offending presence of the big man had been removed. In the train it had nauseated him. He had found himself giving it little, secret glances of horrified appraisal—the pointed shoes, the carefully blunted paunch, the blatantly jewelled tie-pin beneath the heavy, swinging jowl and the bastard speech, now New York, now plummily West End Business—incredulous that the woman who had once been his wife could have had anything to do with this man also. Through her he felt himself defiled.

"What do we do now?" Christopher asked, without an idea in his head. Reaction after the shock and strain of the last few days was beginning to set in, and now that it was all over a mood of apathetic indolence came upon him, and he was content to drift.

"Too early for a drink," Charles remarked, very willing to stay on with Christopher. "Awkward sort of time, four o'clock."

"We could have some tea," Christopher suggested.

"We could, of course," Charles repeated, and added fastidiously, "but I always like a woman to pour out, don't you?"

"That's a luxury I've had to do without," Christopher said, factually and without self-pity. "So I'm quite an adept."

Charles felt vaguely to blame, vaguely ashamed.

"Why couldn't she have gone to you?" he burst out suddenly, off his guard.

"Instead of Grossman?"

The aptness of the question startled Charles. Who was this fellow? Had he been intercepting Charles's secret glances in the train, eavesdropping upon his unspoken appraisal of the big man? "It was Quin, the actor, she ran away with. How did you know I was thinking of Grossman? Not one of those psychiatrist chaps, are you?" He tried to laugh it off.

"I'm an architect," Christopher replied, "and I don't know the first thing about psychiatry. If either of us did I don't suppose we'd be wondering now why she went to him."

"Well, we'll never know now," said Charles resignedly.

Christopher suddenly said with conviction: "If it hadn't been for Grossman she would be alive today."

Charles stopped in his tracks. "Good God, man! You don't mean he—?"

"No, no," said Christopher wearily, the tension relaxed. "Nothing like that. Not foul play. Nothing physical."

"What, then?"

"It's not easy to explain," Christopher began, wishing his listener were Nicholas instead of poor, fettered Charles. "But I've known her since childhood, and she was always so much herself. There was something in her she was always so true to. Whatever strange things she might have done always reflected back, I found, upon some aspect or other of this, her true self. But this last excursion of hers—it was all so utterly foreign—"

"Utterly," Charles agreed in solemn, uncomprehending approval.

"That woman Grossman spoke of, with the pretty things and the fal-lals. That woman wasn't Una."

"By Jove, that's an idea!"

"What?" asked Christopher patiently.

"Mistaken identity. After all, we none of us actually saw the body."

"I did. I had to identify it. And I was at the inquest too. Oh, there's no doubt at all that the body we saw interred this afternoon was Una's. But it isn't the body I can't understand about."

"Oh. Fishy." And Charles was silent. Rum sort of chap. Architect he'd said, hadn't he? Or was it the church? Quite a few of these modern padres went about without a dog-collar these days. Wasn't cricket. Put one at a disadvantage. Like a married woman without a wedding ring. Not playing the game. One should know exactly where one was with them.

He looked up, now with misgiving, at the vast blackened vault above them. Here and there a wisp of white vapour from an out-dated steam engine floated upwards among the girders, seeking egress. He and Christopher were the only two passengers left on the platform, solitary and

conspicuous as unwilling worshippers in the echoing aisle of a nightmare cathedral.

There was something he couldn't understand and this other chap could, and it filled him with apprehension. He must get away. He had lost all desire to stay chatting with Christopher. Rum sort of chap. They were all rum sort of chaps that Una had had to do with, he decided. All except himself. And it was a jolly good thing she had left him and he had divorced her and now she was dead and would trouble him no more.

Chill and cheerless, he suddenly felt a longing for his home, the flat in Knightsbridge, and the safe, steady normality it breathed. He glanced at his wrist-watch once again. Delia would be pouring out tea in their gold-and-off-white drawing-room, with the electric log-fire switched cosily on to keep out the damp and gloom of the wet June evening. If only he could get a taxi he might yet reach home before the tea was cold.

He began to make his excuses to Christopher. "Too bad we can't get a drink," he said airily, in the lazy, casual tone he'd heard Delia use to decline sticky invitations gracefully. "I don't think I'll wait for tea now." He held out his hand in the friendliest possible manner. "So glad to have met you and had the opportunity of a chat about poor Una."

"But the memorial," Christopher called after him. "What am I to say to Grossman?"

"Oh, the memorial. Well, I hardly think it concerns us, do you? Especially if he's paying for it."

"Are we going to let him?"

"Oh, put me down for a fiver—a tenner if you like—if we're going shares. But that's really all I have to say about it."

"Don't you remember the monstrosity he suggested? Don't you care what she lies under?"

"Well," Charles hedged uneasily. "It's not really my pigeon, is it? I mean, as far as I come into it, it was all over and done with when my decree came through."

"I see."

And Charles retorted: "Well, hang it all, I'm married again now—happily this time, thank God!"

"I'm glad to hear it," Christopher said as together they reached the barrier. "Good-bye, then."

But before Charles could reciprocate, and so be rid of him, a slender and very poised young woman intercepted them.

"Delia!" cried Charles.

"Darling!" she replied, becomingly breathless. "Oh, I thought I'd missed you! They told me your train had come in early."

In triumph, almost, Charles turned to Christopher. "My wife," he said, assured, comforted, himself again.

"How do you do?" Christopher said mechanically.

She was wearing black, very modishly, but unmistakably it was mourning.

"Darling," Charles asked her, "how did you know which train? I didn't even know myself."

"I picked out the likeliest," she said, smiling. "Was the wreath all right?"

"Perfect," said Charles. "Do you know," he went on to Christopher, half-proudly, half-scandalised, "she chose it!"

"Poor dear Una," she replied, too becomingly modest. "It's the least one could do. The very least."

Christopher recoiled. The utter falseness of it all struck at him, and he felt surge over him a wave of cold disgust at the modish mourning and the crocodile's wreath. And then he was shocked to find himself savouring the satire of it. He thanked Heaven that Nicholas was not make an ill-timed crack about the generosity to woman, as long as one of them was safely

But he dominated his sudden, outlandish desire to laugh with the absent Nicholas, and instead he murmured with downcast eyes: "On the contrary, it was most generous of you."

"That's what I say!" said Charles enthusiastically. "Indecently so, considering."

"Dear Charles," she teased gently. "So old-fashioned! He thinks it unbecoming in a woman not to show jealous."

"Delia darling!" protested Charles, secretly delighted, as she had known he would be.

"Well, you do really, deep down, darling, don't you? Now, I always think one should face up to these things squarely and frankly and talk them over like civilised people, and do the best we can for one another, don't you? Do you know, it was ages and ages before I could get Charles even to mention her to me. And then it was I who saw the bit in the paper about the tragedy and made a note of the funeral arrangements."

"She was absolutely marvellous. Packed me off this morning, black tie and all!"

Delia patted the tie, quite unnecessarily, and smoothed his impeccably-pressed lapels. "As the second Mrs. Charles Hankey, darling," she gurgled, "I should have felt insulted if you just hadn't bothered to do anything about the funeral of my predecessor."

"Can you beat it?" Charles commented fondly.

"By the way," asked Delia, curiously, "who did the funeral?"

"I did," Christopher replied.

"I say, that was decent of you," said Charles.

"On behalf of the family, of course," Christopher lied quickly.

"Didn't know she had any. No one showed up at the wedding."

"One or two distant relatives. Too old to travel. And I happened to be right on the spot. I was down for a week-end with my mother."

"Do tell me who you are," said Delia, intrigued: "Charles never said."

Only this morning, before he had met Nicholas, Christopher would have shut up politely, and stiffly wished them both a very good afternoon, but now he smiled down at the eager Delia. "I am Christopher Hayward," he said, rather in the manner of a wilfully facetious uncle too inquisitively questioned. "And Una and I used to go to school together. Sunday school, too."

Disconcerted, but undaunted still, Delia suggested tea upstairs in the restaurant. Christopher followed them up, willingly enough, because in the last few minutes they had somehow become detached from his whole existence, as puppets are from reality, and he was becoming remotely interested in their antics. From his new, objective standpoint he found Charles's earnest platitudes and Delia's too conscious sallies entertaining, whereas before they would merely have irritated him, and he discovered that although he appeared to be taking his full part in the conversation at the tea-table, he was really no more than an eavesdropper indulging his curiosity. He began to feel ashamed of this new cynicism of his, but it was easy to see that it was never even suspected.

He deliberately returned to the subject of Earl Grossman's proposed memorial, which he described in all its gilt-and-marble detail, even repeating for Delia's benefit Nicholas's stark comment on the size of life-sized angels. Then he sat back again and eavesdropped to see what she would make of it.

"How perfectly horrid!" she exclaimed with a becoming little grimace. "And so vulgar! You and Charles must

do all you can to stop that dreadful man from desecrating the poor girl's grave."

"What would you suggest?"

"Really," protested Charles, "it's no concern of Delia's."

"But of course it is, darling," she retorted. "Aren't we all concerned with one another while we're here on this earth? I must think of something, Christopher, something simple and quite lovely. Unless—Charles!—why not turn it into a sort of a family grave, and then they could pop either of us in beside her, whichever goes first?"

Charles, red with embarrassment, took refuge in gathering up the bill and busily leaving the tip under the ash-tray for the waitress, who had long since cleared the table. They all three rose together.

"Darling, don't be macabre!" Charles admonished her as playfully as he was able.

"I'm not being macabre," said Delia very earnestly. "I always think one should face up to these things squarely and frankly, and talk them over like civilised people, and do the best we can for one another, don't you?"

"This," thought Christopher, "seems to be where I came in." He neatly parried her appeal, adroitly excused himself, gracefully thanked them both for the tea, and got clean away in the only available taxi.

So Charles found himself standing once more beneath the blackened vault of his nightmare cathedral. It was no longer empty and echoing but alive and chock-a-block with the thrusting, thronging, season-ticket-holding congregation of its hectic evensong. With a cold, distant loathing he felt them surge about him like animals as they buffeted and trampled upon one another in their blind, instinctive, homeward urge. Just like sheep

scrambling for a gap in the hedge, he thought. There was something beastly about them, with their shiny-seated office suits, their drab, work-stale faces and their dusty hair. And how they smelt! He shrank into himself to avoid contaminating contact, a fastidious child upon the edge of a duck-pond.

Once more he felt a longing for his home, and the well-bred ease, the spacious well-being it breathed, with Delia at the tea-table, by the electric log-fire. But he'd had it. And here was Delia, pushed and jostled with him, by his side. There was nothing left to comfort and assure him. One of the scrambling, thrusting sheep had left a dusty hoof-mark on Delia's black suede shoe. Already in the sooty atmosphere he could discern a faint shadow of grime just inside the neck of her white collar: already, in the sweaty miasma, her beautiful make-up was beginning to cake, and her lips, hastily touched up in the restaurant, to smudge. He himself was feeling uncomfortably warm and damp. They must get away, away, before they grew too like the herd about them.

"How do we get home, darling?" she was asking.

"Haven't you got the car?"

"There wasn't time to get it out. So I took a taxi."

He was marooned, then, shipwrecked, cast away and abandoned upon this noisome, teeming desert. There was no escape. He began to feel sick. How Una would have gloated!

Once, through obstinacy over a short-cut and carelessness over petrol, she had landed them in the middle of Fulham Market in the North End Road. The Saturday evening shoppers, crowding one another off the pavements, closed in upon the stranded car, swallowing it up, while he and Una had had to sit in the full glare of their robustly vociferous curiosity, carrying on a futile, re-criminatory argument, back and forth, round and round,

getting nowhere at all, until a policeman forced his way through to them. He could still get the sickening stench of Saturday night cabbage flung out to rot in the gutters, and as they argued an enterprising and single-minded stall-holder alongside them kept offering through the window an orange box of misshapen turnips and yellowing greens for a tanner the lot. This was his final humiliation, and Una had guffawed in his face.

"We'll get a taxi," he said defiantly to Delia.

"Not now the West of England expresses are in, darling! Just look at the queue!"

"We'll go and look for one outside, then."

And Delia came out with her shattering, her unforgivable remark: "My feet are hurting."

Delia, his cool, poised, elegant Delia, Delia whose natural setting was his cherished gold-and-off-white drawing-room—people like Delia and feet that hurt just didn't go together.

"Darling," she insisted, "they're simply throbbing."

How could she! Oh, how could she! Surely she could see how it associated her with the steaming, sweating herd about them. He took her by the arm, peremptorily.

"Come on," he said, "let's get out of here!"

"But, darling, they *hurt*!"

Una, he thought, Una in one of her tigerishly obstinate moods would have allowed a whole train to pass over hers and say nothing. He remembered the blood oozing through her stockings, out of her brogues, after they had trudged for hours through the October countryside on the last day of their stormy, pheasant-shooting honeymoon, and she had been too proud to own to her blisters, preferring to let them burst and chafe into raw, bleeding wounds. He remembered the weary, contemptuous little smile she had given him back in the hotel just before she fainted dead away. There was a pedigree strain running

through Una all right, though Heaven only knew what it had been crossed with. That devilish trick she had of making you feel a cad when you knew you weren't one. Well, that was all finished, finished for good and all, and now there was Delia, Delia to be got home somehow.

"Darling," she was saying, "I think you'll have to carry me."

Carry her! That would mean a crowd, a policeman perhaps, the station invalid chair, the ambulance men. That would mean a scene.

"Rot! People would think you were tight!"

"I think that would be rather fun."

Oh, horrors! She had sat down on the edge of a litter-bin and was easing off her new, tight shoes. Could this crumpled, dishevelled creature gazing despondently at her swollen, throbbing, stockinged feet be Delia, his Delia who dispensed China tea and cucumber sandwiches with such comfort and assurance? She seemed to be fading, slipping from him into the dingy mob about them. In her simple, discreet little mourning suit, crumpled over the litter-bin, she might easily be a city typist. A tipsy typist. A tipsy city typist, sitting in a litter-bin.

His head began to turn. And his eyes no longer focused properly.

Now Una could never have been mistaken for a typist of any sort. Una, with her moody, gipsyish ways and the characteristic clothes she loved to flaunt before him. He had always been on pins lest his friends might conclude he had married an artist's model, or worse, an artist.

"And what pains you took to impress upon them that I, your precious wife, Cæsar's wife, had never had any connection with the theatre, beyond 'finishing' at a drama school, like that sister of yours—I, who held a coveted scholarship there, I, for whom great things were prophesied, I with my voice and the captured world I

held within it. You were ashamed of all these things. You wanted them forgotten, glossed over. You wanted to make even me believe that they had never existed. You tried to kill them in me so that your herd should not shun you for having mated with a freak."

Herd! That was how he thought of the thrusting, sweating mob about him now. She'd breeding all right, but she could be unwomanly, coarse.

"Coarse! It's the truth, and you won't face it. Or can't see it. I don't know which. My God, if I could only blast the scales from off your eyes!"

"Now look here, old girl," he expostulated, "you'd better try and pull yourself together. Go upstairs and lie down or something."

"Lie down, darling?" Delia protested. "Lie down here in the middle of Waterloo Station? They would think I was tight then. They'd think I'd passed out completely, wouldn't they?"

"I daresay, I daresay," he replied hurriedly, bewildered and horrified at having unconsciously thought aloud for the first time in his life.

Where was it leading him, this whim of Delia's that he should attend the funeral of his first wife? It had started something, and already within him a private fear was forming: Was Una dead going to be more alive than Delia living?

II

CHRISTOPHER LIVED alone in an uncelebrated terrace of Regency houses on the edge of Primrose Hill. The exterior still gave him so much pleasure that he had fallen into the habit of remaining on the 'bus from his office in Baker Street beyond his proper stop and alighting at the next one, in order that he might enjoy the prospect as he turned to approach the upper end of the terrace obliquely across the open ground.

In spring and autumn it was usually about sunset when he returned from his work, and so he was most familiar with its massive silhouette breasting the hill against a wild, tattered, oyster-tinted March sky, its solid oblong chimney stacks set in steps across the coping marking its progress up the slope. Or in early October he sometimes came upon it basking in the reflected afterglow, warm and mellow as a peach. Once, after a night journey from Scotland, he had taken a taxi from Euston and paid off the astonished driver at the 'bus stop in the middle of the open ground, in order to trudge with his bags the last few hundred yards across the drenched grass. And the cool, pallid light of the watery sunrise had crept slowly over the whole façade, a gentle searchlight to rediscover for him every forgotten detail.

But inside it was quite different. The company who owned the terrace had more than ruthlessly modernised it. They had scooped out the entire interior and recklessly reconstructed within the shell.

When Christopher had first come to look it over, his

ordered architect's mind had been appalled at the violent incongruity of styles. Eventually, however, he became reconciled to the contrast. He could appreciate the practical, push-button comforts of his top-floor service flat, and at the same time be grateful that the ornate exterior had been so meticulously preserved. For the company might so easily have made away with the individual canopied balconies with their slender, fluted pillars, and replaced them with communal shelves of solid concrete. He even found it amusing to look out from his austere labour-saving living-room through a cream-shuttered Regency window-frame. But he preferred to stand outside on the hill, beneath the hawthorns, and look inward at what had been once and now no longer existed in material form.

He dismissed his taxi from Waterloo, again a few hundred yards short of his destination, but now the rain had ceased and the clouds lifted, thin and high. Still some hours from setting, the midsummer sun filtered through, suffusing everything with a cool lemon glow, a kind of visual fragrance which brought back to him the evening primroses in the dusk of his mother's garden, long ago. Una had stood at the gate, her white face glimmering, and mocked him quietly for the sorry figure he had cut in their Grammar School Pastoral, mimicking in that uncannily flexible voice of hers his poor, laboured, mouthing efforts.

It had been purgatory playing Florizel at fifteen. Ungraceful, sensitive, he had shrivelled in the glare of his own shortcomings. Even the robust Polixenes and Camillo began to flag, once the novelty of their crêpe hair beards had worn off—along with the beards themselves. And Mopsa, a stolid, forthright girl, unable to see an inch before her without her thick, myopic spectacles,

groped mutely protesting through the rustic revelry. Only the bear enjoyed himself.

Una alone surprised them. Christopher never knew whether it had been a flash of insight or merely blind indifference on the part of their English master to cast as Perdita this difficult, scrawny little girl with the remarkable voice that nobody had ever noticed, because people don't usually notice the voices of other people's children. And anyhow she had been forced to use hers all her persecuted little life in self-defence, so that her normal tone had acquired a thin, mosquito quality that nearly always ended in a sudden, pouncing sting. Living alone, as she did, with a mother sunk in hypochondria, she knew that to bring school friends home with her was out of the question, and her child's pride forbade her to accept the few invitations that came her way, since they could never be returned. With years of hugging herself to herself she had become a poor, dried-up husk of a child, the odd one, the queer one, to be whispered at in corners with covert nudges and crooked smiles as cruelly as only children, in their malicious innocence, can. But now this new experience of being someone else, someone fresh and charming and altogether delightful, released in her all the warmth and grace and pent-up tenderness of which she was capable. At last she could give. This was her party. Exultant, she spoke out beyond the fidgeting Polixenes and the poor, shambling Camillo, beyond the patient, emotionally petrified Florizel who whiled away the interminable waits between his cues by nervously uprooting a dandelion that grew out of the school lawn beside his downstage foot, while he swayed precariously on his upstage one. She seemed to speak out beyond the audience in the green amphitheatre, bidding joyously all the world to her feast.

Standing now in the late-clinging fragrance of the

faded hawthorns, he could hear her still, soaring, swelling, throbbing out the ecstatic spring flower speech. Earlier in the day, while he stood out in the churchyard, the lines had haunted him, floating unhurried through his mind as great, white, garlanding clouds pass in procession across a summer sky. And when the moment arrived at which the big man next to him began to stir uneasily and mutter and sigh and twist his hat-brim in his fat fingers, Christopher was thinking:

Not like a corse: or if,—not to be buried,
But quick and in mine arms.

He had never held her as the big man had, and Charles, and Nicholas too. All that he had ever had of her were memories, ideas and dreams. There was nothing of her, then, that death could take from him, no loss to mourn. This passing of her body, which never had been his, was no bereavement but a consummation.

He went indoors.

The façade had once sheltered a serenely spacious hall, from which a delicately balustered staircase curved away upward into shadow, beyond the radiance of the great pendant candelabra of flashing crystal. Now it masked a cramped, low-ceilinged lounge, rubber-floored, chromium-furnished, plastic-upholstered, fluorescent-lit.

Christopher walked unseeing past the hall porter, busy at the reception desk with the back page of the evening paper, past the cheaply lavish, rose-tinted mirrors on the walls and the scarlet fire-extinguishers, strategically disposed among the potted palms, and as the silent, impersonal lift shot him upward with plumb-line efficiency, he felt more than ever on the one hand the essential transience of this glittering, flickering, inarticulate mediocrity that had no existence beyond this, its material

manifestation, and on the other hand the overwhelming presence of things past.

Inside his flat he hung up his hat, replaced his carefully re-rolled umbrella in the stand, and smoothed his gloves away in a drawer. Then he methodically changed his jacket and shoes for a dressing-gown and slippers, and sat by the window of his living-room, looking out.

The primrose light was beginning to wane to lavender, and by an open window farther down the terrace someone was playing Debussy. Once more Una took possession of him, crowding in upon him and filling him so completely that he, too, seemed to have escaped, flowing out from his body, leaving it abandoned and motionless in its dressing-gown and slippers by the window.

The thin, mosquito echo sounded across the years: "P'raps I won't die either—just to spite you!" Instinctively he put out his hand to touch her, only to withdraw it immediately, self-disillusioned and half-ashamed of the sensual origin of the impulse. Whatever had happened to Una, he was earthbound still, earthbound enough to expect to verify her presence by the purely physical sense of touch; earthbound enough to mind what kind of a memorial was erected over her body, and even his memories of her could be nothing more than a series, however vivid, of physical images in sight and sound.

He began to feel hungry, and automatically rang for food. Still with a lurking sense of guilt and degradation he ordered only a light supper—an omelette with white wine—and as he ate and sipped his wine he thought soberly: "Some day I suppose I shall have to marry a wife."

Some nice girl who, in return for his name and his financial support, would minister to his physical needs and further his material ambitions: some nice girl, superficially charming, but whose every thought he

would be able to read in advance. Some nice girl, as dull as Charles's Delia.

There was still the question of the memorial. All the next day it worried him, nagged at him, interrupting his work. He happened, appropriately enough, to be engaged upon plans for the restoration of a bomb-damaged Regency terrace of houses south of the Park, an assignment which he had been looking forward to with a deep, satisfied sort of pleasure, and which in the ordinary way would have absorbed his interest completely. But it had only his superficial, his professional attention: the rest of him was listening all over again to the conversation in the train.

"A memorial, gentlemen? I'm taking care of that. A white marble scroll with nice gilt lettering, supported by a couple of life-sized angels, eh?"

"But don't you think a group like that would be rather—extravagant?"

"Oh, at my own expense, of course! At my own expense!"

"It wasn't the expense I was thinking of. I just can't see her with scrolls and gilt lettering and marble statuary."

"Ostentatious, don't you think?"

"Like orchids on a coffin."

He put his work aside, lit a cigarette and decided to concentrate upon the memorial. The only way to get it off his mind was to do something about it, make a decision. Besides, he must have some alternative to offer Grossman. Only then would he be fit to put into his drawings the creative force they deserved. But now that he had broken free from his work, he found himself unable to think constructively about the memorial. He was in that perverse

mental state where one thinks best about something in an oblique, surreptitious sort of way, while actually engaged upon some other thing. Miserably he stubbed out his cigarette and went back to his drawings. Later on, in an unguarded moment, he confided in Mr. Palethorpe, whose junior partner he was expected one day to become.

It was during the hour after lunch, when the unaired office was at its stuffiest, and the staff yawned and nodded, overcome by the combined effects of their digestions at work and the thick, stale air they condemned themselves to inhale. Old Palethorpe regularly sent out for the office dictionary and the gazetteer, for it was at this time of day that he tackled *The Times* crossword. Often he summoned Christopher too, to help.

"Well," he said, remembering as he looked up that Christopher had been away for a day or two. "Funeral go off all right?"

"Quite successfully, thank you," Christopher replied with simmering irony.

"Oh, really," said old Palethorpe as he filled in a word. He hadn't expected that answer, but felt a little uncomfortably that it was the right one. "Good attendance?"

"Very poor."

"Oh, really." He filled in another word. "Relatives, I suppose."

"She had none."

"Dear, dear, to be sure!" He laid down his pencil.

Goaded by the old man's affable indifference, Christopher went on in the same level, emotionless tone which he might have used to discuss the rear elevation of a public wash-house: "You see, she lost her mother a year or two after she left school. Not that the mother was ever much good to her. A chronic hypochondriac. And the father could never be mentioned because he deserted them both a year after she was born."

"Oh, really. Dear, dear. Most distressing." Palethorpe eyed his crossword again, furtively. He, too, was vacillating in the same oblique, surreptitious sort of way between the crossword and the private affairs of his prospective junior partner, which he felt needed looking into. Resolutely he pushed *The Times* aside and said: "What—er—what exactly was it that prompted you to do all you did for this—er—this unfortunate young woman?" He made the word "unfortunate" sound like a stigma, and Christopher winced with anger.

"We were at school together," he replied in the same flat, impersonal tone. "And, as you say, she was unfortunate."

"Oh, really. Never did approve of this co-educational system," Palethorpe muttered, baffled. He pulled *The Times* towards him once more. "Oh, well! Glad you've sown your wild oats, and got it over, my boy. And buried 'em too!"

Christopher saw that it was useless to protest. It would only bring forth old Palethorpe's excruciatingly elephantine, finger-wagging brand of humour. If nothing would please him but to put that construction upon it, Christopher thought contemptuously, very well then, let him, the old clod.

"There's a word here of only five letters—" Palethorpe began wistfully, but thought better of it, tailing off into an uncomfortable silence. Then he said: "By the way, dear boy, how are you getting on with the Park drawings?"

"I've made a start," Christopher replied non-committally.

"Splendid!" said old Palethorpe with insincere enthusiasm. "They're just up your street—or should I say terrace? Te! He!"

"Yes," Christopher agreed, thinking forlornly of the

technically faultless but quite uninspired set of drawings now spread over his desk.

At last old Palethorpe caught something of his dejection. "Cheer up, old friend," he cried suddenly with depressing heartiness, "cheer up! I know you've had quite a trying time these last few days, but it's all behind you now, isn't it, eh?" Then, with a grotesque incongruity, he resumed: "Play tennis?"

"No."

"Pity. Pity. You should, you know."

"Why?"

"Why?" old Palethorpe repeated, taken aback. "Why? People do, you know. People do. Nice healthy game. Meet more people that way."

"Nice, healthy people who play tennis?"

"Quite so, quite so."

A tide of flat, cold exasperation crept over Christopher.

"You suggest, sir," he said, "that I take up a game I loathe in order to meet people who are keen on it. Why?"

Old Palethorpe peered at him, dismayed. Poor boy, he thought, must be upset still. Aloud he said benevolently: "Meet some nice young ladies. Time you married and settled down, you know."

For a moment Christopher had a hideous feeling that he was about to be patted on the head, and recoiled instinctively, but even as he drew back he caught the hurt look on the daft old face that was all jowl and no brow, and admitted penitently: "As a matter of fact I was thinking that only last night, sir."

"Well done," said old Palethorpe, fatuously triumphant. "Well done!" But he had the sense to say no more, except: "I'd rather my junior partner was safely married, you know."

"Thank you," said Christopher gratefully, going, but

on a sudden quite unaccountable impulse he turned back and said:

"It's the memorial I'm worried about. If only I could make up my mind what to do."

Old Palethorpe looked up once more from his crossword. "Memorial? What memorial?"

"Hers."

"But, surely, my dear boy, after bearing the expense of the funeral you don't feel obliged to—"

"There's nothing to feel obliged about!" All his nervous impatience came surging back. "But someone else suggested one. A perfectly hideous monstrosity."

"Someone else? So there were others, eh?"

Christopher cursed his indiscretion. All he had done was to arouse the old man's old womanish appetite for gossip.

"Yes," he said steadily, "there were others. This man and her ex-husband and another."

"(One, two, three and yourself. Four strings to her bow, eh? You're well quit of her, my boy."

"But the memorial," Christopher soliloquised, heedless of old Palethorpe's innate vulgarity. "What am I to do?"

"Do?"

"Am I to allow this man to erect his monstrosity, or—"

"Certainly not, dear boy. Certainly not. If you paid for the grave, then I think you'll find no one else has any right at all to touch it. And if you have any doubts at all on the subject, then all you have to do is to ring up the authorities, whoever they are, and get them to confirm what I say. Simple." And old Palethorpe beamed and nodded him out. The dear boy's problem was solved.

Back in the privacy of his own desk, Christopher shut away the drawings and spread before him a fresh sheet of

paper. It was a habit of his, a kind of ritual which he went through whenever he had a problem of his own to work out for himself. The fair, white surface was a symbol that cleared and prepared his mind for a decision, for it had always been the potential rather than the actual that inspired and excited him, the outline that he might rather than the outline that he did eventually trace upon it. And as he sat, looking down upon it with his pencil idly poised, Una stole back to him.

Across the years he heard her voice again, from the hollow oak in the hedgerow: "Christie!"

He turned and ran back for her, anxious and flustered. "The bell's stopcd. We'll be late for Sunday school."

She smiled at him in her leisurely, grown-up sort of way, and announced coolly in tones far too mature for an eleven-year-old: "I shan't. I'm not going."

He stared at her, shocked, and acutely aware that his discomfiture amused her. She thrust at him her album into which each Sunday they pasted a gilt-framed coloured print illustrating the afternoon's lesson, and said mockingly: "You'd better take this too, and stick mine in for me. I should hate to miss Elijah being fed by the ravens!"

He wavered still, in a child's agony of indecision, and the church bell began again.

"Go on, silly! You'll be late. It's the second bell."

At last, he said: "I—I'm not going either."

He hid both their albums beneath the layer of withered leaves within the hollow oak, and in a sudden access of self-assertion and defiance shouted across the meadows towards the old church: "We're not coming! Do you hear? We're not coming!"

Una threw up her head like a pony sniffing the west wind. "Where shall we go?" she cried. "Where shall we go?"

"The quarry!" he shouted excitedly. "Let's go to the quarry!"

About a mile from the village, in a pocket of the Downs there was a disused chalk-pit which they both had been forbidden, as it had long been neglected and the cliff-face was crumbling dangerously. With his fit of bravado still upon him, Christopher began to scramble up the white cliff, shouting exultantly as he went: "I'm a mountaineer! I'm a mountaineer!"

But Una, with her long legs, easily beat him to the first small green platform, and as he drew himself up after her, panting, perspiring and covered in white dust, she announced: "We're going to play Perscus and Andromeda. Go down again and find yourself Medusa's head."

Without a word he obeyed her, and began to search about on the quarry floor for something to represent the Gorgon's head. He rejected a square petrol tin and a battered old kettle and finally found a rounded clump of grey-white chalk, which he had probably dislodged from the cliff-face in his first wild onrush. It was just the size of a human head, and he was able to grasp it by a tuft of green grass and coiling creeper which still sprang from it as vigorously as Medusa's own snake-locks.

"Don't look at it!" Andromeda commanded from her grassy platform. "Don't look at it, or you'll be turned to stone. Take off your jacket and cover it over!"

When he reached the platform again, the grisly head wrapped in the jacket of his best Sunday suit, he found that she had twisted long trails of giant white trumpet-flowered convolvulus about her, the glossy vine-shaped leaves casting their azure shadows in patterns over her white dress. There she stood tragically awaiting her immolation. Impressed, he respected her silence. Then she began to murmur rhythmically in a low, throbbing tone, swaying as she spoke: "There's no wind, yet the sea is stirring,

stirring. There's no tide, yet the water is rising, rising. There's no wind, yet the sea is stirring, stirring—"

"Look!" he interrupted, helpful but irreverent, "there's old Timothy the hunchback. He'll do for the beast that comes up out of the sea to get you."

The two children looked down as the misshapen dwarf passed along the lane beneath them, his huge, bulbous head wobbling at every step he took.

"No," she said, "not Timothy, because I can *see* how ugly he is. It's the things you can't see that really scare you. Like the dark. And it works the other way too, with beautiful things, I mean "

Her junior in all but his one proud year, Christopher had always stood secretly in awe of her, and now he stared at her, uncomprehending yet intuitively aware that something which he would always regret not having grasped was being said. But she swept heedlessly on:

"Once you've seen it, you've seen how lovely it can be, and sort of stopped it growing. And you wish you'd not seen it but just gone on thinking it, so that it could have gone on growing and growing, lovelier and lovelier, inside your head."

She let her outstretched arms fall limply to her sides and looked hungrily into his face for some response. But there was none. He stared up at her still, blankly, stupidly and utterly wretched because he could feel just how blank and stupid he must be looking. In the hot sun his head throbbed and he thought:

"I've failed her. I've failed her. She's told me the loveliest of all her secrets and I've failed her."

At last she turned from him and, with a frighteningly unchildlike irony, she began slowly to unwind from her the trailing spirals of convolvulus. Already it drooped in the sun. "Look at my garlands," she mourned. "Dead and withered. Look at them!" She shook herself free of them.

"But they're only weeds anyway! Weeds in a silly old chalk-pit!"

She turned to him. "For goodness' sake take your jacket off that thing! It's simply caked with chalk, and your mother'll blame me, of course! And that Gorgon's head of yours! It looks like a pudding, and it's only a lump of chalk anyway!" She grasped it by its offensively innocuous locks and with all her strength flung it back on to the quarry floor. "There! It's all smashed to pieces. Smashed to pieces!"

She sat back on her heels and began to cry.

"Oh, how I wish we hadn't come out here! I wish we hadn't stayed away from Sunday school! It's cool and dark and quiet in the church, and I could have shut my eyes and played it all to myself inside my head, while they droned away to us about Elijah and the ravens."

Hurt, bewildered and mortified, he slid miserably down the crumbling cliff once more, leaving her to her lonely, passionate tears upon the grassy ledge.

From his desk Christopher looked back at the boy he had been then, and thought how much better Nicholas would have managed things. No such wretched withdrawal for him! He would have stayed and dried her tears, probably with his own pocket-handkerchief. But then, of course, Nicholas would never have occasioned them—unwittingly; for if he hadn't been able to grasp the shining truth of her secret he would have known instantly how to look as though he had.

Una, the cager, solitary child, hemmed in with her thoughts, craved nothing so much as to be able to reveal herself, and, thought Christopher with a twinge of wistful envy at his own missed opportunities, Nicholas in his few short months with Una, the woman, must have come

to know all there was to know of her: hence, perhaps, their disastrous parting, the enigma of her last fantastic weeks with the big man, and now her final tragedy. Perhaps it was Nicholas who knew, who held the clue to this, the fatal one of her many mysteries. And Nicholas, walking out upon the rain-swept heath, Nicholas he had irretrievably lost.

He became aware that his telephone was ringing. "Hullo?" he replied mechanically.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hayward. This is Maidie Matthews, Mr. Earl P. Grossman's secretary, speaking. Mr. Grossman's been expecting you to ring him all the day, Mr. Hayward."

"What about?" said Christopher, nettled.

"That little matter of the memorial, Mr. Hayward, that he was discussing with you yesterday in the train. He's very anxious to put it through as soon as possible."

"Put it through?"

"That's right, Mr. Hayward. With the minimum of delay."

"By the way, how did you get my number here?"

"Oh, that's just part of a secretary's job, Mr. Hayward."

"A very efficient one, if I may say so!" Christopher commented ruefully.

"Thank you, Mr. Hayward. Now, Mr. Grossman suggests—"

But Christopher cut in quickly: "Before we go any farther, I wonder if you could help me get in touch with Nicholas Quin, the actor?"

Pat came the answer: "I'm sorry, Mr. Hayward, but we only keep a record of the addresses of artistes actually under contract."

"I see."

"You could try Equity."

"Thank you," said Christopher, "I will." And with

astonishing alacrity he rang off. Then he told his own operator that he would be accepting no more calls that day, and put through one to Equity.

While he was waiting for it the office boy appeared with tea and the evening paper. He set down the slopping cup and saucer with an air of suppressed triumph and, whistling effervescently under his breath all the while, he folded the paper and turned it sideways for Christopher to see the Stop Press column. But Christopher's whole attention was on the 'phone.

The boy still lingered. "England eighty-one for five, sir," he said unquenchably; "and Compton in to bat."

"Oh," said Christopher. "Cricket."

The boy smiled and nodded encouragingly. "That's right, sir!"

Christopher turned the paper over slowly so that the front page stared up at him. The funereal headlines announced hopelessly the continuation of the Berlin blockade, a celebrity divorce, a black market conviction, an assault, a murder with mutilation and the resumption of fighting in Palestine.

"That's splendid, isn't it?" he said absently, dismissing the boy.

As he began to stir his tea, he noticed a small paragraph at the foot of the page, which stated tersely that Nicholas Quin, 27, of Consort Crescent, Camden Town, had been admitted to hospital suffering from the effects of coal-gas poisoning.

III

IT WAS not until after he had safely passed the barrier at Wimbledon Station that Nicholas remembered the fraud he had just practised on the railway. The ticket he had given up was not even a third-class one, but a platform ticket. Out in the High Street he caught his breath as he thought of the casual, automatically innocent way he had surrendered it when he bounded up the concrete stairs and out into the station yard, glad to shake off at last the suffocating constraint of the four-square compartment. One moment of genuine preoccupation had saved him the strain and ignominy of acting innocent to carry off his imposture; but the sordid odour of it clung, and he knew that now it would poison his precious hour upon the heath with Una, just as it had corroded and finally destroyed their life together.

As he drove his long legs up the hill towards the common he could hear behind him her cool, collected drawl: "Poor Nicholas. So you even came down to my funeral on a penny platform ticket. I wonder whose wreath you pinned your card on? Still, it was nice of you to make the effort."

"I had to get there somehow, and I was down to my last half-crown."

"You always were."

Almost running, he thought: "Is this all, then, that remains to me of her? This nagging, buzzing, mosquito of a woman from whom once I was glad to part?"

And the weary, sententious drawl went on: "Shall I

tell you what Earl Grossman's saying now? He's telling the others in the train, Charles and Christie, that you've got something ail right, got something all right—but won't ever get anywhere with it. And do you know why? Because you've no common sense. You're never in the right place at the right time. And if you are, then you're bound to open that big mouth of yours and say: I'm damned if I will! And just when you should be saying: Goody, goody! you clamp it down tight and look unpleasant."

"Una," he pleaded, "it was you who exposed me to myself. It was you who taught me never to do what I knew wasn't right or true."

"My fault! Everything's my fault! Even your fraud on the railway!"

"That! That was purely material. Twenty-three and fourpence. Enough electric power to draw one poor near-corpse of clay to bid farewell to another. Una, you've no soul. No soul!"

"No soul! I, whose body you've just left behind you in the churchyard. No soul! That's the funniest thing I ever heard!"

That was more like her. The real Una. His Una.

"Well, anyway, I left you no wreath, my darling. I can't steal flowers."

"He can't steal flowers! He can bilk and cadge and wangle, but he can't steal flowers!"

Under the downpour the common was deserted except for a solitary horseman who, booted and spurred, splashed incongruously past the drab allotments on the fringe. Nicholas hurried by, looking carefully away from their searing cinder paths, their sagging wire-netting and their haphazard tool-sheds of accumulated junk, whose dripping decay exhaled the same crazy squalor as the bamboo and oilcloth of his own dark lodgings in Camden Town.

He fled across the heather to the ring of pines called Cæsar's Camp, where he paused and then began to saunter slowly up and down across the circle of lush, sodden grass within their circumference: for it was here that Una had first come to him on just such an evening a year ago, stealing upon him from behind one of the trees, gloveless and empty-handed.

"I've come," was all she said, "and I'm not going back."

He said nothing at all, but took her hands, and together they left the place. It had been as simple as that.

They had begun to follow the course of the little stream which springs from the marshy ground just below the circle of pines and flows down through the woods into Surrey. But the rain lifted suddenly, and they caught sight of the Surrey hills looming before them, blue as a Connemara landscape. Enchanted, Nicholas pressed forward, but Una hung back.

"No," she said. "Let them be. Let's keep them as we see them now."

So they turned and walked up to the highest point of the common, an airy glade of silver birches, and from there looked their fill across the valley, until the rain came down again and dissolved the stencilled outlines.

"It's always like that after rain," Una remarked as they walked away towards the Windmill.

"But it's another world altogether," said Nicholas, marvelling still.

"I know. And that's how I want to keep it." Her lilting, flowing voice suddenly took on a thin, sharp edge to it, as a child's does just before tears of disillusion. "You've never been over there, have you?"

"No. Why?" He was unprepared, suspecting nothing.

"I have. Right over the top. In Charles's Humber. It's only the 85 'bus route into Kingston really. And where

you see blue hills from here there are street-lamps with litter-boxes, and rûbs and sewers and elderly ladies with dogs."

It was then that he kissed her.

The tears came, and as he held her to him she cried: "But you understand. You understand."

He trudged on, alone now, to the Windmill where they had sheltered in an arbour and warmed themselves with mugs of tea until it was time for him to return to the theatre in the High Street for the evening performance.

The tea-gardens were deserted, as they had been then, and he was able to recognise their table, the only round one painted yellow. It was now set out in the open, surrounded by alien chairs. Their own, a red and a blue one, and the white one on the rungs of which she had rested her feet, were lost amongst the others. He stood by their yellow table looking slowly around him, searching for them, but there were so many, painted red and blue and white. He found a certain solace in identifying and piecing together the various tangible objects that remained of that first evening of theirs, just as the sick mind of an invalid is soothed and comforted by the mild exertion of piecing together a jigsaw puzzle. And having found his three chairs and looked upon them once more, he mentally placed them, as they had been, about the round yellow table, and lived through it all again as he might a scene in a play.

The rain increased, and as he showed no sign of moving the girl left in charge of the counter called out to him to shelter. She called three times before he heard her.

"Well," she remarked as at last he joined her, "you have got it bad!"

"What?" he responded.

"In love, aren't you?" she said archly.

"I wonder," he said, quite seriously.

"Go on, course you are! Standing out in all that, catching your death—"

"My death."

"Tea or coffee?" she rattled on, unaware of the idea that was beginning to form within him.

"Tea, please."

She poured it out for him and he felt in his pocket for the money. He was wet through. He stirred the dark, bitter brew with the nickel spoon on the end of the damp string, and the girl leaned on her elbows, watching him. When he put down the mug again she said eagerly:

"What's she like?"

"Why don't you tell her?" Una goaded him.

"A bitch."

"Go on! Been going with her long?"

"A year."

"Time you found someone else, I should say."

"She'll never let me."

"Why not? Has she got anything on you?"

"Everything," said Nicholas, searching the rungs of the white-painted chair for the marks of her feet and thinking of her blue, distant hills which in the end he had destroyed for her. "Everything."

"My, weren't you silly!"

The girl poured him out a second cup of tea and pushed it across the counter. "Have this one on me," she said. "You aren't half wet." Again she leaned on her elbows and watched him gulp it down. Then she hazarded: "I bet she's a smashing blonde."

He looked across at her, resenting her curiosity, but unable to rebuff her crude sympathy. "No," he said, "her hair was of the colour which it pleased God."

"Well, I never!" she said stupidly, tossing her own skewbald locks. "Fancy the likes of you talking religious to me!"

"Religious?"

"Well, God and all that."

"God and all what?" he smiled back at her, but she missed its bitterness and retorted good-humouredly: "Awkward customer, aren't you?"

"Awkward? Why?"

"You haven't half got a nerve. What do you want to drag in God for? Why can't you let Him stop where He belongs?"

"Where is that?"

"In church, silly!"

"I disagree. Do you ever go there?"

"Course I do! Sometimes. Like everybody else."

"For a wedding or a christening?"

"That's right."

"Or a funeral?"

"Or a funeral."

"I was there this afternoon."

With a sudden surprising flash of intuition the girl ran her tongue over her lips and said: "Not—not hers, you wasn't?"

He said nothing, but turned away from her and stared across at the yellow table. Moved, she leant over the counter and touched his shoulder.

"I'm ever so sorry," she said, hopelessly inadequately. "Ever so." Confronted by the blind silence of his squared shoulders, she went on nervously: "I don't know what to say to you, I'm sure. You're such a queer card, aren't you?" And again: "Well, it lets you out on her anyway, doesn't it? I mean to say, if you done her wrong like you said, then her troubles are all over now, aren't they? And yours too, come to that."

He turned and looked at her again, with such a hungry desolation that she shrank away against the shelves of crockery and set them rocking.

"I do believe," she said at last in a tight, stifled little voice, "I do believe you done her in."

But he shook his head slowly, ponderously, and with a terrible grief upon him said: "Ah, if only I had! If only I had, it would have been so easy to be quit of it."

Cowering behind the counter, she began to whimper, and so he left her and went out upon the heath again.

The rain was over now and the wind had dropped, leaving the drenched air heavy with moisture. Overhead the clouds still hovered, and through them seeped an unearthly sulphuric brightness that turned the pallid shadows to slate and morbid lilac. The unrippling rain-puddles took on a solid, leaden look, and under the clump of alders by the Windmill the grass glowed fiery green as it does beneath a November fog. The tracts of heather that curve away towards Roehampton spire and the Green Man on Putney Hill shrivelled in the withering radiance to cinder black. And over it all there settled an unquiet stillness.

Numbed with the misery upon him, Nicholas made his blind way through the churned-up sand of the riding track towards the Green Man. The lurid, cloud-perverted sunlight intensified. He felt he was walking quite apart, through a tepid vaporous inferno of mauve and mawkish chrome, merging into slaty grey. And so it would always be, now and for ever and ever and ever. A cold, sickly hell of bleak negation that would stretch on and on and on, all the way. As long as life lasted.

At the Green Man he climbed on to the 'bus, the plush-upholstered, pneumatic-tyred tumbril that was to carry him farther into the grey, numbing wastes, as far as some merciful vanishing point.

It was parked by the edge of the heath, empty and

silent until his footfalls on the stairs set it creaking and lurching on its springs. He settled into a front seat, hunched with the chill from his wet clothes. Mechanically he felt in his pocket for a cigarette, but his fingers found only a sodden pulp, for the tobacco had swollen with the moisture and burst through the damp paper. He dragged it forth piecemeal, and the matches too, and spread them on the seat beside him.

At last the driver climbed into his cab, started the engine and swung the great reluctant juggernaut slowly round into the main road. There it stopped again, but no one was waiting at the post; no one but Nicholas was riding back to Camden Town.

As they coasted down Putney Hill the conductor climbed grumbling up the stairs for his fare. Short, brusque and taciturn, he seemed to resent the presence of his one passenger, which marred the emptiness of his 'bus; so much that he would not speak even, but just stood looking down at him, his lips pursed and his head cocked, an outraged sparrow.

Nicholas felt once more in his pocket, but that last shilling of his eluded his chilled, wet fingers, and by the time he succeeded in retrieving it they were through the High Street and had reached the river.

"The bridge," he thought urgently, panic-stricken, "I mustn't miss the bridge." And, oblivious of the little conductor's fiery, rolling eye upon him, he turned in his seat and looked upriver at the gracious, tree-lined, Whistler-celebrated curve of the Fulham bank before it should be too late. Already he felt himself a returning traveller who had left it perilously late to collect his cherished mementoes.

The little conductor stood on, speechless, Nicholas's shilling bouncing sardonically in his palm.

"All the way," said Nicholas.

He punched the ticket and with it handed Nicholas his change, all in halfpennies for revenge. Nicholas stared at them, so strangely fascinated that the conductor snapped at him: "That's right, ain't it?"

"No," said Nicholas. "Not for my purpose. I must have pennies for the gas."

"Oh, you must, must you?" the conductor snapped back. But he took the halfpennies, and as he handed Nicholas the two pennies in exchange he glanced with fastidious distaste at the damp, disintegrated cigarettes and the sodden matches on the seat by his side.

"You won't get nothing alight with that lot," he remarked with an old-maidish sniff of satisfaction. "So mind you don't gas yourself when you do git 'ome."

Left to himself once more, Nicholas shut his eyes in an effort to meet the unconscious half-way. "I must prepare myself," he said, "as for a journey."

It was not until the 'bus was passing Baker Street Station that he opened his eyes again, in time to catch a glimpse of Regent's Park. The lurid light had softened to primrose, and the green grass and the trees were beginning to look themselves once more. The rain had been over long enough for early evening pleasure-seekers to venture out again, and now they swarmed in their strolling hundreds along the canal and over the bridge to the gardens. This was the normal, tranquil world, the world in which he could no longer have a part.

Nevertheless it aroused in him the same panic-stricken urgency he had felt on crossing the river at Putney. He must get down at once and partake of it once more before it was too late. So he left the 'bus at Primrose Hill.

He walked along the pavement of Albert Road until he came to the open ground, intending to walk across it up the slope, but on his left he came upon a quiet terrace of old houses which seemed to have been standing

there for a century or more, unnoticed behind their screen of poplars, and unsung.

There were lights in some of the windows, open and still uncurtained, and from the whole there issued forth that gentle, complex rumour that comes from pleasantly inhabited places—footsteps and the click of a latch, a softly slammed door, a sudden burst of music, or conversation, the snip-snip-snip of busy garden shears, and away in the distance a little dog barking.

Feeling the stir of evening upon the place, he began to saunter slowly past it up the hill, and as he went he gazed in upon each lighted window in turn with all the wonderment of a child who has lifted the front off a dolls' house. This should be his leisurely leavetaking, his farewell draught of life.

There they were, with their card games, their conversations and their readings, their letter-writing, their household accounts, their ironing and their cooking: there they were, arguing, entertaining, working, reading, or simply lying back enthroned in the luxury of doing nothing—all the things that one is apt to do on a wet summer evening.

Nicholas paused to watch a grey-haired woman darning socks beneath the rosy silken glow of an old-fashioned standard lamp. Farther on, a schoolgirl in a blue dressing-gown sat drying her hair by an electric bowl fire on the table beside her. A book lay open before her, and as she never turned a page he assumed that she must be learning by heart. Every now and again she would sigh and run her fingers through her fluffed-out flaxen hair, but whether in despair of ever committing her lesson to memory or merely to see whether her hair was dry he could not guess.

Towards the upper end of the terrace he saw an elderly Jewess setting a family supper-table. He watched her

glance at the hideously efficient electric clock over the mantelpiece, fold away her sewing, heave herself up energetically from the overstuffed depths of her arm-chair and teeter top-heavily on her tiny feet across to the sideboard. She opened a drawer and took out the table mats of crocheted lace: next came the silver, the condiments, the bread and the butter, and finally the glasses. He watched her chubby white hands setting them all out with the deftness of the card-dealer of the bridge-party next door. But she had one weakness: when she leant across the table to set the far side under the window, she could no longer tell left from right, for the knives and forks facing the window were all set in reverse. She must have been doing this for years, he reflected, a sudden spring of tenderness welling up within him, as his own mother had years before in his own long-forgotten home in Dublin, and here too there must be a conspiracy among her devoted brood to bear with it and say nothing. Already he could see those who would sit at the window side exchanging little secret smiles as they surreptitiously rearranged their knives and forks. She was coming back now with a pile of little side-plates, and these too he could see would be wrongly set in the places by the window.

"Other side! Other side!" Nicholas cried at her under his breath. "Can't you see you're looking at it upside down, mother?" And it was as much as he could do not to lean over from the steps to the window to tap on the glass.

He turned abruptly from the cosy, teeming life within the terrace, lest he should become too addicted to the mellow draught, and struck out across the open for his own, the squalid side. The primrose light was beginning to wane to lavender, and by an open window farther down the terrace someone was playing Debussy.

But the ethereal, other-worldly music floating after him only invested him with a false nobility, a majesty and desolation that smacked of the theatre, so that he turned inward upon himself and was so filled with the aspect of his own personal tragedy that there was no longer any room in him for Una. In the greying summer twilight he passed on his way, heavy with destiny as a Greek hero who exits to his doom.

And all the while the other, the practical half of his actor's split mind, split soul, was deprecating the dusty obscenities of the bamboo and oilcloth setting for the final death scene in Consort Crescent, and urgently asking: "Will twopennyworth be enough?"

IV

MAIDIE MATTHEWS was not accustomed to being taken advantage of, except of course by the Boss: it hurt her pride. So when Christopher abruptly rang off after having elicited all the information he could get from her without having given any satisfaction in return, she persuaded herself that they had been accidentally cut off, and cursed the exchange. Doggedly she got through once more, only to listen, incredulous, to Christopher's new little operator guilelessly explaining that she was so sorry she couldn't put her through to Mr. Hayward as he had just that very moment said he would be accepting no more inward calls. As a matter of fact he was waiting now for another number he'd just asked her for.

"Equity, I suppose," Maidie commented acidly.

"Why, however did you guess?" cried the naïve child in pleased surprise.

But Maidie had already rung off. Equity! And the Boss had said he was easy.

Grossman burst in through the communicating door from his own office, in his arms a sheaf of monumental masons' catalogues which he let fall in a shower over Maidie's desk.

"Good staff work, Maidie," he enthused. "Pouring in by every mail."

She bit back the temptation to remark that she was only too well aware of it as it happened to be one of her duties, had been for the last fifteen years, to open and deal with his personal mail, and instead she flashed

him a routine smile. "Thank you, Mr. Grossman," she said.

Oh, for a nice, quiet, respectable city gentleman, steady and she didn't care how stolid, with methodical ways and an even temper: regular hours, regular duties, regular everything and no hanky-panky! Nothing to have to keep shutting your eyes to, although there was never anything actually wrong, legally wrong. Everything he did was always quite watertight. . . . And she'd turned it all down last Wednesday week, turned it all down out of loyalty.

As she began for the second time that day patiently to sort the mound of unwieldy catalogues into a tidy pile, he went on:

"You might just run through them—won't take you more than a minute or two—and pick something nice in white marble. Then I'd have a concrete proposition to put to that young Hayward. Nice guy. Nice guy."

"Certainly, Mr. Grossman," said Maidie, her own work beginning to show through the catalogues once more.

"Good girl!" he rumbled jovially. "It's a woman's opinion I want. A woman's opinion."

She took up the topmost catalogue and began to flick over the pages at random.

"Money no object!" he shouted excitedly. "Don't spare me expense!"

"Of course not, Mr. Grossman."

"That's right, Maidie, something real classy."

"I'm looking, Mr. Grossman."

"She was all the world to me."

"Of course, Mr. Grossman."

Loyalty? Or was it just habit, just weary, dogged habit? After fifteen years of putting up with things and seeing them through, you begin to run down like a clock or something, so that it's easier to stay than go. You need a

push. That's what you need after fifteen years, a damned hard shove.

Suddenly he swung round on her.

"Why hasn't that young Hayward come in to see me yet?"

"Mr. Grossman, I—"

"Don't tell me you couldn't get him!"

"I'm afraid I couldn't."

"That's a lot of tripe!"

"I tried, Mr. Grossman, but—"

"You're slipping!"

"Oh, no, Mr. Grossman, I'm not slipping, You see I—"

"Don't contradict me! When I say you're slipping, you're slipping."

"But Mr. Grossman, I got his flat number from the book. I've been ringing all day, and then they let me have his office number and—"

"And you couldn't get him!"

"He wasn't available, Mr. Grossman. I've been trying."

"I don't care if you've tried a hundred times. When I tell you to get someone, you get them. See? That's what I pay you for."

"But, Mr. Grossman—"

"Shut up! And get his office again."

"Yes, Mr. Grossman. . . . You're through, Mr. Grossman."

He snatched the receiver from her. "Put me through to Mr. Hayward, Mr. Hayward I said, Mr. Hayward!"

And the naïve child at the other end of the wire said her piece once more.

"But I'm Earl Grossman!" he expostulated.

"I'm ever so sorry, your lordship," came the fresh, piping treble, "but Mr. Hayward's gone out now. Very sudden too. He was just waiting for me to get him Equity

and then off he went and wasn't there any more when they came through. So I had to tell them, just like I'm telling your lordship."

"Equity? What does he want with Equity?" the Boss bellowed.

"I'm sure I really couldn't say, your lordship," the child quavered, but with perfect truth.

"Is he in the show business too?"

"Oh, no, your lordship! We're architects. Would you like to speak to Mr. Palethorpe?"

"No—I—would—not! And stop calling me your lordship!"

"I'm ever so sorry, your grace. Could I take a message for Mr. Hayward?"

"How soon will he get it?"

"I could tell him when he comes in tomorrow morning first thing that Lord Grossman rang him up."

"I want him now. And I'm not Lord Grossman. Where's he gone?"

"I'm ever so sorry, but I really couldn't say."

"And there's a hell of a lot I could say!" But he rang off first. Not, however, before he overheard the shocked child say: "Well I never! Calls himself an earl, too!"

It was Maidie who bore the brunt of his reaction.

"Get up, you! You're fired!"

She rose from the midst of the catalogues, white as the monumental masonry. "Mr. Grossman, I—I don't think I quite caught what you said."

"You heard."

"But, Mr. Grossman, I—I've been with you fifteen years."

"Fifteen years too much. Get out!"

It had come, then, at last. He had never been quite so unreasonable before, but now he seemed unbalanced, quite unhinged. There was nothing for it. The sooner

she got out the better. Quietly, collectedly, she gathered up her handbag, moved across to the peg where her jacket was hanging and slipped it on, drew on her hat, her gloves, and crossed to the door.

"Get your money from the cashier!" he roared after her. But she never even turned her head. "Queer," he thought, vaguely uneasy. "What's the matter with the girl to act so quiet?" An outburst of some kind would have been reassuring. Women always acted that way when you got tough with them. They either cried or threw things. All the women he'd ever had to do with. Except Una. Not that he'd ever got tough with her. Known, somehow, in advance it would be no use anyway. And now Maidie.

He was about to follow her, but the 'phone rang and being alone he had to answer it.

"Is that you, Earl?" cooed a bogus American accent.

"Who's that?"

"Oh, *Earl!*"

"Well, who is it?" he snapped, his mind still dwelling uncomfortably upon Maidie's departure.

"Can't you recognise my voice even?"

"No, I can't! Line's bad."

"It's swell my end."

"Well, who are you?"

"I'm Dulcie."

"Dulcie?"

"Yeah, Dulcie! I'm calling you up from Southampton. Ain't you going to say you're glad I'm back?"

"Oh, hyer, Dulcie. Course I'm glad. Good crossing?"

"Good crossing! What's biting you, Earl? That's no way to talk to Dulcie!"

"Sorry, honey. You've caught me at a bad moment. I'm—I'm busy."

"Busy! Here's Dulcie calling you up the very minute she sets foot on shore and all you can say is you're busy!"

It's enough to make a girl jump right into the sea!"

"What's that?"

"I said it's enough to make a girl jump right into the sea."

"Dulcie, you mustn't do that! You mustn't do that! Do you hear me, Dulcie?"

"Yeah, I c'n hear you. Course I won't, if you say not, Earl darling."

"When are you coming up to town?"

"Ah, that's better! Right now."

"Listen, honey, I'll be at Waterloo to meet you, and we'll paint the town red!"

"Goody-goody!"

"I'll be there."

"You better had, you great goop! What's the matter with you? You sound all on edge."

"So I am. So I am. I'm busy, I tell you. Busy."

"Well, so long, and God bless."

"God bless," he responded absently.

He rang off, but could not shut out from his buzzing ears Dulcie's light-hearted threat—enough to make a girl jump right into the sea. Or into the river. There it was, flowing invitingly by beneath the window, just the width of the Embankment roadway away. He leaned out anxiously and, not seeing Maidie among the passers-by, he drew back, half-embarrassed at his concern.

But it was there, inside him, gnawing away like the crab in a nightmare he had once had. He remembered waking in a shivering, paralysing sweat and convulsively clutching and dragging at himself in a frenzied effort to pluck it out.

Over on Maidie's desk one of the catalogues caught his eye. It was open at the illustration of a neat little tablet, unobtrusive and efficient as Maidie herself. In fact it might have been one of her own index cards in

three dimensions. He read the black script on the staring white: SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF—

Maidie Matthews. Maidie Matthews. No, not Maidie! Not poor little Maidie! Been with me fifteen years, so she said.

He fell upon the house telephone and roared for the cashier. But the cashier hadn't seen her. No, sir, she hadn't collected any money from him. The doorman, the doorman would know! But the doorman hadn't seen Miss Matthews either. Without him seeing her? That was unlikely, sir, but it could have happened. While he was out calling someone a taxi. Oh, yes, it could have happened. As a matter of fact that was probably what had happened. Undoubtedly, sir. As he was hailing the taxi. Did Mr. Grossman want to see her, then? Something important? Urgent, was it! Maybe a matter of life and death? Certainly, sir. He would do his utmost to find her. Mr. Grossman, sir, might count on that. Oh, there she was, sir! Coming out of a telephone booth in the entrance hall. Must have been making a call, sir. In the telephone booth, sir. That's right. On the telephone. Coming towards the door she was now. In a hurry, sir. Hurry—

"Catch her, you damned fool! Catch her and for Pete's sake don't let her go!"

What's up? thought the doorman, standing plumb in Maidie's path. Never heard the Boss so upset.

He hustled the protesting Miss Matthews into the lift and haled her before the Boss, lingering discreetly by the door to watch the fun. But the Boss didn't come up to scratch.

"Thank God you're safe, Maidie!" he almost whimpered.

"Safe?" she said quietly, blankly, her composure tinged with a contempt which curdled his anxiety. He

began to feel as foolish as he had after his valet had got him out of his nightmare by massaging the phantom crab from his stomach.

"Get out, you!" he blazed suddenly, at the hovering doorman. Then, when they were left alone, he said: "Sorry about that little upset just now."

She had never before heard him apologise to anyone, except the Lord Chamberlain.

"Find out for me when the boat-train arrives from Southampton, Maidie," he went on, feeling that everything was all right again. "There's a dear."

But she didn't stir. "I've got myself another job, Mr. Grossman," she said steadily enough, although her eyelids flickered with elation.

"I don't believe it. Not in five minutes."

"It's one I turned down a couple of weeks ago, Mr. Grossman, out of loyalty to you. But they tell me on the 'phone it's still open for me. So now it's all arranged."

"How much?" He was himself again.

"No, you can't get me back that way."

"I'll double your salary."

"I still prefer not to work for you, Mr. Grossman."

"What's that?"

But she knew he'd never understand about the regular hours, the regular duties and not having to keep shutting your eyes to things. She'd open hers wide, right now.

"What did you mean just now by thanking God I was safe?"

"Oh, forget it."

"It's you who's trying to forget something, isn't it, Mr. Grossman?"

"What do you mean?"

And she knew that she had him on the defensive.

"It got you scared about me just now, didn't it? Well, you can set your mind at rest as far as I'm concerned,

Mr. Grossman, because I'll not be qualifying just yet for any of your propositions to be erected over me, concrete or marble!"

"Now, listen, Maidie, it was Dulcie. She's just called me up from Southampton and threatened to jump in the sea."

"In the sea? Dulcie Drury? Why did she have to wait until she'd landed?"

"Aw, she didn't mean a thing. Just got me scared for the moment. After all this business. You know what a tender-hearted guy I am. Especially with you girls, eh?"

"Three little tombstones all in a row, eh?"

"That's right," he wheezed, relieved. "All in a row. Brr-rrr!"

Maidie suddenly faced him, direct across the catalogues.

"What did you do to her?"

"I never touched her!" he reacted, off his guard. He knew whom she meant, then.

Maidie went on implacably, feeling her new power: "I've seen her come in here, and she never looked right with you like Dulcie and all the others did. There was something wrong about it all. Something wrong."

"It was an open verdict," he shouted, losing his head. "So you can't pin anything on me!"

"Not at present I can't, Mr. Grossman, but I'd like to have a damn good try!"

Left to himself in the flat, anticyclimactic silence that followed the abrupt exit and the slammed door, he began to feel strangely secure. All right. Let them do their damndest. For the first time in all his sharp-dealing, go-getter's career he knew that no one could pin anything on him because this time there was nothing to pin. Absolutely nothing. He hadn't touched her. Wasn't even there when it happened. Forty miles away. He began to

rub his hands as he pondered the simple, the impregnable truth.

And yet, within this new, this factual security, he could find no rest, no quietude. At peace with the law, he seemed to be at variance with some unknown, other thing. The crab still gnawed. He clasped his hands protectively, defiantly over his stomach. But the malaise wasn't there. He could not lay his hand upon it. He didn't remember ever having felt just that way before.

Self-consciously and with a shy elation, he wondered whether this new unfamiliar sensation could possibly be one of those discreet, nicely-controlled emotions, to be indulged in in the study or the boudoir, which he had always secretly revered as luxuries reserved to Class. He moved across to the row of pegs on the wall and looked at himself in the mirror hanging there that Maidie had forgotten to take with her. Could it be that this vulgar, bloated old man who had shoved and trampled his way up to the top of the show business, could it be that he had it in him after all, he also, to participate in these fine, elusive sentiments which underlay a wedding at St. Margaret's, say, or a fashionable bereavement? If so, that put him on a par with all those wooden high-hats and their dumb dames that dressed so lady-like you wouldn't know them from a secretary—all the crowd that got their pictures in the *Tatler*, week after week, at exclusive dinner-dances and supper-parties attended by Royalty, or equally select country house-parties, or queuing in their cars to get into Buckingham Palace, while Earl P. Grossman, with friend, only figured occasionally at the races. If this was grief he was feeling, then, exclude him as they might, he was in with them, in with them.

Women had left him, left him flat, and one had even

died on him suddenly, under an operation, but he'd never felt like this before. He'd always felt sore, kind of baulked, like when his cook had walked out on him and there was no dinner, or when in a roadhouse where he wasn't known they'd refused to serve him with drink out of hours. Never like this. His hands moved up to his chest. Was it there, or was it up in his head? He wondered if he ought to try and cry, just for relief. Better not. Not here. If anyone saw him, if any of his staff were to come in from the general office, they'd think he was cracking up. They'd think he was nuts. Besides, he couldn't anyway. Must be past it. The only time he had ever been known to cry was under an anæsthetic, having his teeth out. And Class didn't cry. He was quite sure of that. The women dabbed a little with their hankies and put their feet up, and the men always blew their noses loud and fierce. He hadn't presented a score of popular revivals for nothing. Now that he'd found out he had after all a subtle something in common with Class, he must behave as Class did and keep a stiff upper lip. According to that play of Somerset Maugham's he'd revived a year or two back they went out, when they felt the way he did, and had their hair washed. Well, he'd have a Turkish bath. He unclasped his hands and sighed. Good for his figure, anyway. He looked at his watch. There wouldn't be time with Dulcie to meet on the boat-train.

Somerset Maugham. He was proud of that first break of his out of musicals. He went over to the cabinet and took out the four-year-old bill: EARL GROSSMAN'S CONSTANT WIFE. There followed other, more profitable revivals in swift succession, no fewer than five of them having run simultaneously. Fondly, he drew out the bills, one by one.

That guy Barrie was sure a money-maker, and his stuff had the best kind of Class, too—whimsey they called

it. EARL GROSSMAN'S MARY ROSE. That, he remembered, had first drawn Royalty to one of his matinées. And Coward's brittle elegance had lent him tone, which more than compensated for the hearty Broadway successes he had imported wholesale, cast, props and scenery. And there was his first proud venture into Shakespeare, EARL GROSSMAN'S ROMEO AND JULIET. But Shaw, being still very much alive, had been firm about the billing, and for him the bumptiously possessive routine had had to be broken. After that, the eager, docile, escape-hungry public of the war-time years had been offered EARL GROSSMAN'S SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER and EARL GROSSMAN'S SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL, but he jibbed at the bawdy Restoration plays. Classic or no classic, how they could possibly get by the Lord Chamberlain was quite beyond him, and having had in his earlier days so much trouble in negotiating his lavishly furtive musicals safely through the straits of censorship, he was loath to risk any further his already debilitated reputation. So instead the public had been regaled with EARL GROSSMAN'S HEDDA GABLER and even with EARL GROSSMAN'S CHERRY ORCHARD.

Last of all came the crowning achievement of his artistic pretensions, and it had been at her suggestion. As they were driving down the Avenue one afternoon after lunch at the Ivy, barely two months ago now, a traffic block brought them face to face with a whole procession of sandwich-men advertising his wares. He felt proud of the display, but became a little uneasy before her silence, the queer set of her mouth and the impatient, disdainful way her eye swept from placard to placard. Perhaps it was a bit much, twenty-two of them, all proclaiming as his the stuff the other guys had written. But, damn it all,

he'd put the money up, hadn't he? And a pretty penny too. Never mind. He'd tell Maidie to have some of the men fired. A dozen would be enough.

When the last of them had gone by, exhorting the public to see EARL GROSSMAN'S HAMLET, she relaxed, turned to him and, with her faint enigmatic smile, murmured: "All I need to see now is EARL GROSSMAN'S MEDEA."

Within six weeks there it was, on, his pride and joy because, being from the Greek by a real college professor from Oxford, it was bound to have Culture as well as Class. Wouldn't run more than a couple of weeks of course, if that, but he felt that he needed a high-class failure or two to enhance his prestige. For he had made the discomfiting discovery that the Right People considered it rather vulgar to make too much money too quickly and too easily.

His run of good, straight plays, classics, Shakespeare and all, didn't seem to be getting him anywhere, he reflected, staring at the now emptied cabinet. It was the people on his pay-roll who seemed to be getting the decorations and the titles—the guys who acted and the guys who wrote. He must break into something else. Too late for hospitals with this new health racket coming in. Politics, then. EARL GROSSMAN, M.P., would look good in the papers. Only he must choose his party carefully. If only there was some way of knowing in advance who'd win the next General Election. Earl Grossman, M.P. In time they might make him a lord, a real earl, if he offered them enough. Maybe that fool kid on the line had something after all when she kept calling him your lordship. Lord Grossman of Grosvenor, Lord Grossman of Gerrard, Lord Grossman of Temple Bar. He'd pick a title all right. Out of the 'phone book. And Una would have been a swell name for a countess, a real countess.

For there was nothing, nothing in the world he could have denied her, Una, the apple of his eye.

Queer how he'd never wanted to lavish things in that way on any of the others. Just to let them have their due so's no one could call him mean. But Una, Una for whom nothing had been too fine, too rare, too costly, Una had to be the one who never looked right with him. Had there really been something—something wrong? Or was it just Maidie? She sure could be a sour old bitch.

But the queer, faint smile still lingered on. "All I need to see now is EARL GROSSMAN'S MEDEA." Could there have been something wrong? Could she have been taking the rise out of him in that quiet way of hers, and he'd taken her dead serious and gone all out to get the show on for her, the show she hadn't lived to see? But she'd always acted so sweet and gentle. Dumb, almost. That Quin fellow had broken her spirit, poor little woman, poor little woman. And anyway, why should she want to take it out of him when he'd bought her every mortal thing a girl could possibly want—and more besides? Why, he'd had to have her jewellery alone insured for several thousand, and she'd hardly even looked at half of it. Said she liked flowers better. And yet when he'd filled her rooms with orchids at ten and six a bloom she'd cleared them all out and bought herself a bunch of that cheap, white, starry-looking stuff they sold on the barrows to put with carnations.

Simple they'd have called her, back in his native manufacturing town in the North. Well, there was something simple about a lady. She never had her prestige to think about like the others did, himself included. It seemed to take care of itself. So that was what Maidie had noticed, damn her eyes! And he'd tried so hard, so hard.

✂ The crab was choking him now, and his eyes began to smart and burn like they did in the smoke of winter fogs. He took out his handkerchief. No, he couldn't stick out the night with Dulcie. Not this way. He'd have her met with flowers and compliments and excuses. He'd have to go out right now and take that Turkish bath.

V

"DID WE send for you?" she asked gravely, a pink-and-white fairy off a Christmas tree, who ought to have wilted away beneath the stiff, formal uniform of a staff nurse, and so fragile that Christopher couldn't imagine of what use she could possibly be to any hospital. He looked down at her hands. Clapsed in repose they seemed to be made of clouded glass, and he felt a burning curiosity to behold the white transparency of her forearms with the blue veins showing through. Perhaps later on he might see her moving about the ward with her sleeves rolled back.

"Did we send for you?" she asked again, softly, pleasantly, objectively.

"Well, no, you didn't. It was in the evening papers. So I just came along, you see." He spoke shyly, apologetically, as though he had no right to be there.

"I see. You're not a relative?" Looking up at him, she yet condescended so that beneath his well-tailored clothes he felt his knees knobbly once more and his wrists red and protuberant. But there was no school cap dangling from his hand, no canvas satchel, no jar of tiddlers. That was how this solemn, sprightly child in uniform had made him feel.

"I—I'm afraid not. Just a friend."

The starch fell away from her and suddenly she was back on her Christmas tree, smiling down at him.

"He'll need one," she said. "Can you wait?"

"All night, if need be," said Christopher.

She smiled again at his fervour. "Oh, I hope he won't be as long as that," she said. "But it might be a good thing for you to be there when he does wake up."

She led him out of the empty, sterile corridor into the teeming ward, where the first of the supper trolleys were colliding with the last of the blanket baths. But Nicholas, in his screened-off bed, lay still as the corpse he had so very nearly made of himself.

There was a remote, marble stillness about him beneath the smooth-drawn counterpane, so that, coming upon him feet first, Christopher was grotesquely reminded of the effigy in the village church at home of the Crusader Knight. The sculptor had caught so much of a real person in the rigid features that Christopher had never been able to make up his mind what it was that had impelled the young man to embark for the Holy Land—religious devotion or merely high adventure. In Nicholas's features, too, there were the same conflicting indications, the same subtle contradictions—the rounded, thrusting, dented chin and the finely-curved nostrils, the full, fleshy, sensual underlip and the wide, dreaming eyes. Years ago Christopher and Una had gazed upon the effigy and pondered what kind of man he could have been. On the way home through the meadows and the dusty chalk lanes they had argued, quarrelled, agreed and dreamed about him, inventing for each other stories of his prowess and delightfully impossible adventures, and always at the end one of them had sighed: "All the same, I do wish we could have really known him." Well, here he was, coming back to life.

The fragile pink-and-white staff nurse bent over him and, discerning something, she announced in subdued triumph: "Ye-es . . . Any time now." She wheeled the trolley by the bed farther away to make room for Christopher.

"When did they bring him in?" he asked.

"During the night some time. He was wet through, too, poor soul. And that's not going to make things any easier."

"He was out walking in all that rain last evening," Christopher began to explain remorsefully, "and I ought really to have been with him."

But in spite of all the trite rejoinders she could have made she chose to say nothing, employing the pause to place a chair for him. As he sat down he felt her fingers, her fingers of cool, clouded glass, brush across his shoulder.

"You'll know what to say," she said warningly, confidently, as she left him. And as she went he saw that she was beginning to unfasten her starched cuffs. He screwed himself round in the hard, slippery-seated visitor's chair to crane after her, reluctantly, guiltily hungry for the pulsing blue-and-white of her bared forearm as he had been for his solitary frugal supper in the lavender dusk of last night. Last night. Someone had been playing Debussy, and as he ate and drank he had thought soberly: "Some day I suppose I shall have to marry a wife."

Nicholas stirred, and Christopher, conscience-stricken, swung round again, hanging contritely over him. Nicholas murmured: "Can't you see you're looking at it upside down, mother? Upside down." Then he relapsed into rigid immobility, and Christopher wondered if he ought to recall the nurse. Oxygen or something, he thought uneasily, might be needed now that Nicholas was really coming round.

He began to murmur again: "Debussy. And the lighting's right too. Dead right. Over the hill and exit. But what a set, oh, my God, what a set to die on. Over the mantelpiece When Did You Last See Your Father? And bacon and cabbage-water hanging eternally in the air."

"Nicholas," said Christopher, gently, compassionately,

single-mindedly putting aside all thoughts of the pink-and-white, blue-and-white staff nurse. "Nicholas, it's me, Christie, here with you. Christopher. We were in the train, Nicholas, in the train. Talking about Una and the white flowers. In the train." But it was no use. There was no entry that way.

A change crept over him. For the first time he really moved. His marble-still legs began to kick a little beneath the white, constraining counterpane, and his hands travelled blindly in an aimless, futile way, back and forth and back again over the folded sheet. He began to mutter in an obsessed staccato: "Got something! Got something! Got something all right. Won't ever get anywhere. Won't ever get anywhere."

"Of course you will, old chap," said Christopher heartily, helplessly, and hating himself for it because it was so like old Palethorpe. "You're going through a bad patch just now. That's all."

And there was no entry that way either.

Nicholas was marble-still once more, but his mouth had taken on its twist of impotent bitterness. He began to speak again. "A bitch," was all he said, and then again, "A bitch."

Christopher hung over him, perplexed, and then as the staff nurse returned and stood aside observing her patient, Nicholas went on: "And her hair was of the colour which it pleased God."

Feeling the eyes of the staff nurse expectantly upon him, Christopher plunged undaunted into the breach. "Come, shall we hear this music?" he quoted at random, glancing back at her for approval.

She laid her finger on her lips, smiled and whispered: "That was very clever of you. I said you'd know what to say!" Then she looked down at Nicholas, who was now lying wide-eyed and bewildered, but perfectly conscious.

"That was Shakespeare, wasn't it, Mr. Quin?" she said pleasantly. "I'd like to have seen you in that part."

"Shakespeare?" said Nicholas without a notion of what had passed but instinctively keeping up appearances. "I don't remember playing it lately. I don't remember playing anything lately. What am I doing here anyway?" He struggled on to his elbow.

"You mustn't exert yourself," she admonished him, her fingers already on his pulse, "because you've been very ill. And you're here to get better." She turned once more to Christopher. "Hasn't he?"

Nicholas recognised Christopher with relief. "Hullo. Pity you couldn't get out of that train in time." And he added gropingly: "Wimbledon, yesterday, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Christopher, smiling and awkward once more.

"How did you know I was here?" asked Nicholas, carefully, craftily, suspecting the conspiracy of the well against the sick.

The staff nurse took her fingers off his pulse and popped her watch back into her pocket. "Excuse me," she said to Christopher as she squeezed past him to make a note on the patient's chart hanging high above Nicholas's head. "Five more minutes," she said warningly as she left them alone again.

Nicholas looked after her with vague hostility. "What am I here for?" he asked Christopher urgently, fearfully. "Was it an accident? Tell me, I'm not maimed, am I?" And he kicked feebly, exultant that he still had legs.

"Pneumonia," Christopher improvised, remembering the staff nurse's warning look. "Double pneumonia," he added desperately, seeing that Nicholas was unconvinced. "You were out walking in the rain last evening, on the common."

"The common," said Nicholas. "My God, the common."

And at one glance Christopher saw that he remembered everything. His eyes closed once more as the crushing darkness of inexorable reality came down upon him, and his face fell in and shrank at the hideousness that now confronted him. Christopher stared down at him in consternation. He looked grey and withered and brittle as a twig of lopped-off dead-wood. He must be dying. No one could look like that and live. Christopher glanced wildly round. "Nurse!" But panic had stifled his voice as it does in a nightmare. She was away at the other end of the ward, vanishing through the swing-doors, out into the cold, sterile corridor. She was gone. There was no one near him. Only the drowsing, indifferent patient in the next bed. The supper trolleys and the blanket baths had gone, and everyone had settled down for the night, peacefully, comfortably, callously, with not another thought for the bed behind the screens. He tried again, but he couldn't cry "Nurse!" through the thick, repelling silence of the ward, and he couldn't leave Nicholas either. So he waited helplessly, ignominiously, characteristically, for the end.

But Nicholas's eyes were open, and he no longer looked moribund. Only exhausted, resigned, contented almost, as with his old, flickering smile he muttered: "So twopennyworth wasn't enough?" And with a tired sigh he added: "Never was any good at stage-managing."

He turned over on to his side and snuggled his head into the pillows, a voluptuously sleepy child, setting Christopher free once more to dream of his pink-and-white, blue-and-white staff nurse.

She would be back again now. He sat down once more

on the hard, slippery-seated chair she had set for him by the patient, now tranquilly sleeping. Their patient. She had made that quite clear by her whispered approbation: "I said you'd know what to say." Quite clear, by the live, warm tone of confiding intimacy, which in itself admitted a joint responsibility, a shared task, a living secret between them. That already was something.

"Five more minutes," she had said, and already it seemed as many hours since between them they had helped Nicholas back to life. His hunger, his reluctant, guilty hunger to behold the pulsing blue-and-white of her bared forearm flowed pleasantly back as he sat serenely expectant, awaiting her blessed return. It was not until his appetite had reached its full, imperious tide that he realised suddenly and with an abating, parching sense of shock that the feast must have already been set before him, and removed again, without his ever having perceived it. He couldn't remember now whether her sleeves had been up or down at the absorbing moment of Nicholas's return to consciousness: nor had he even been aware of her closeness as she had squeezed past him to reach the chart above the bed.

So it had happened again! Oh, how could he, how could he? All over again. The starry hedge-flowers that ought to have gone on Una's coffin, her child's secret he had failed to grasp, the train at Wimbledon, and now this. Would he never, never recognise his moment in time, be aware of it while it was still there, catch it before it vanished into eternity?

His lotus-eating mood of tender sensuality had left him, and he sat tensely forward on the very edge of the chair, alert, eager for action, coldly reasoning. Her name. That was the first thing to discover. After that—

The swing-door creaked. Here she was. But he didn't hear it swing shut again. She must be standing there,

holding it ajar. How could she tantalise him so? His mood of cold reason began to crack and split and melt away like an errant ice-floc that has fallen in with the Gulf Stream.

She was talking to someone out in the corridor. Actually standing there on the threshold, talking. He strained his ears but could catch no word, only the intonation of a question, a surprised question put almost in disapproval, and he trembled for the intruder, hugging himself to think how gracious she had been with him.

In reply came the intruder's voice, thin, fatuous, penetrating and unwelcomely familiar: "I didn't say I was, but aren't we all concerned with one another while we're here on this earth?"

He heard the staff nurse answer with a weary little monosyllable, and then Delia resumed: "I suppose I am a relative—sort of—by marriage. You see, my husband's first wife lived with him."

And again the same, weary little monosyllable that would have deterred, if not vanquished, anyone less dull than Charles's Delia. But no, on she dribbled like a silly tap: "I'm not being ultra and existentialist and all that, but I do think one should face up to these things squarely and frankly and talk them over like civilised people and do the best we can for one another, don't you?"

Christopher, cowering gratefully behind the screens, waited for yet a third weary, patient, deadly little monosyllable, but this time a wakeful and disgruntled patient intervened, and he spoke for all the ward: "Put a sock in it, missus, for Christ's sake!"

And they all had the satisfaction of hearing the swing-door close at last as the staff nurse re-entered the ward alone. She made straight for her gas-poisoning patient.

"I'm afraid you must go now," she said to Christopher with a dreadful professional authority.

"Yes, of course," he replied, as timid and apologetic

as when he had first arrived. "Thank you for letting me see him."

But she took no more notice of him. Delia seemed to have destroyed something of theirs.

"I—I think he's asleep," he ventured, hoping to mitigate her sudden brusqueness.

"I can see that," she said rather tartly, but with underlying satisfaction, and as he turned to go she smiled across at him her old, Christmas tree smile.

"Nurse," he burst out suddenly, desperately, with a vestige of his interview with old Palethorpe still wafting and billowing topsy-turvily through his shaken mind, "do you play tennis?" He stopped abruptly, his mouth still open, horrified at his own naiveté, and his remorse was so comic that she smiled again, indulgently.

"Of course," she assured him, but in such a measured, deliberate tone, that he knew she had heard him aright, "of course he'll get better."

Outside there was Delia to contend with. She was still lurking ineffectually about the corridor, and she fell upon him with delight.

"Oh, Christopher darling! Isn't it ghastly? I saw it in the paper. How is he? Have you seen him? Will he get over it? Is there anything we can do?"

Christopher waited for the senseless string of questions to peter out and then said very quietly and firmly, and not without presumption on his own more privileged position with the staff nurse: "I've just left him peacefully asleep."

"Oh, *no!*" gasped Delia, ripping the lace border from her handkerchief with her little rabbit's teeth. "Not *that!*"

"Why on earth not?" asked Christopher, irritably. "Sleep's the best thing for him."

"Oh," said Delia, cheated, "I thought you meant he was dead."

"I'd have said so if he was," Christopher retorted, looking her up and down.

She had discarded yesterday's mourning along with the shoes that pinched, and was now more engagingly attired for her errand of mercy in flowered chiffon, very full and feminine, beneath a flowing cherry-coloured cloak that somehow suggested a rather chuckle-headed Lady with the Lamp.

Feeling Christopher's scrutiny upon her she went on nervously: "I'd just got in from a round of golf at Rochampton when I saw the evening papers, and so I rushed straight here, without stopping for *anything*."

And Christopher wondered cynically how the flowing, trailing chiffon had kept itself intact and unbedraggled throughout the eighteen holes.

"I didn't even wait for Charles."

"No?" said Christopher.

Once more she felt baffled and angry as she retreated back along the blind alley of Christopher's jocosely avuncular irony. She was not used to being made to feel disconcerted because she had always left that kind of man severely alone, but Christopher looked such a pet. She couldn't believe it of him and so, as she had yesterday on the platform at Waterloo, she tried again: "I've got the car outside. Can I drop you somewhere?"

"Thank you," said Christopher, "but I'm on my way home. And that's right out of your way."

"Nowhere's out of my way this evening. You see, I've got the whole evening to kill."

"And Charles?"

Too glibly she replied: "Talking business at his club. So you see I'm a grass widow until midnight."

"How jolly! You'll be able to get all your little jobs done, won't you?"

"Jobs?"

"Don't you find they accumulate? They do with me, living alone."

She decided to risk it. "Do let me mend your socks for you."

"My socks?" He laughed outright, sincerely amused. "The valeting service looks after that."

"Oh."

He resumed awkwardly: "As a matter of fact I've got a bit of research*to do tonight. Some drawings I'm engaged on for restoring a Regency terrace. And after that there's my income tax to catch up with, and some bills to be attended to, a distant and boring relative's invitation to be tactfully declined, somebody's birthday tomorrow—I must find out whose. Always something." Rather belatedly remorse overtook him: "It was sweet of you to think of the socks, though. Good night."

She laid her fingers on his arm, and he tried not to see them because the lacquer on the nails gave the flesh a slightly grubby look, which disgusted him. "Aren't you even going to let me drop you?"

She slithered across the shiny leather upholstery to her driver's seat, leaving the car door standing open.

"Well—" he wavered, "thank you." He climbed in beside her and slammed the door.

She held her chatter until they had shaken off the grey, supplicating streets that cling, with their dusty parks and decaying cemeteries, about a great hospital, and for once in his life Christopher was grateful for their squalor. As they turned into the Euston Road she remarked tentatively: "I suppose you knew Una most frightfully well?"

Once more he sought refuge in avuncular banter:

"You've quite a morbid taste in hobbies, haven't you?"

"Morbid?"

"Your husband's late ex-wife, for instance."

"She intrigues me."

"And the way you try to gate-crash casualty wards to visit young men you've never even met, because they've just failed to gas themselves."

"Oh, but don't you see, that was Una too."

"How do we know?"

"But isn't it obvious? He simply couldn't go on living without her, poor lamb! So romantic!"

Christopher felt nauseated, but he made the effort. "Not at all. Nicholas is an actor—"

"Doesn't that rather prove my point?" she interrupted, stupidly knowing. "And we all know what these actors are, poor dears!"

"I think," said Christopher gravely, "that you are confusing the actors with the characters they play."

She was watching him, wide-eyed and baffled, as she had been in the hospital lobby, so that she did not notice the traffic lights change to green at Devonshire Place.

"Nicholas is an actor," Christopher pursued, more for his own enlightenment and satisfaction, as though she wasn't there at all. "A good actor, they say, but so far commercially unsuccessful. We don't know why he should be. Perhaps he has an awkward temperament, or maybe he's too single-minded and uncompromising to get on in the more mundane sense. But if he knows he's in this world to act and society won't let him, then he's had it, and there's no point in going on with it, is there? At least that's how he'd feel, perhaps."

"Oh," she wailed in dismay; "but where does Una come in?"

"That I don't know," he said, almost cheerfully.

"Somewhere, I expect, but she alone is not responsible for what he did last night."

"You men simply won't give us credit for anything!"

He saw the lights turn red again, and seized his opportunity. "Might as well drop me here," he said, and was out on the pavement with the car door slammed safely shut behind him before she could protest. "I'll cut across the Park." He raised his hat punctiliously, relieved and smiling, and crossed before the waiting traffic over to Albany Street.

By the time the green light released Delia in pursuit he had dived into the bushes out of sight and was making furtively for Baker Street by the footpath along the bank of the canal. He had already decided not to risk dining at home. Delia was a nice girl, but importunate as only the very dull can be.

VI

HE EMERGED at last behind Madame Tussaud's and took refuge in a passing taxi, which carried him safely through the danger zone of Marylebone Road and Baker Street to Portman Square, where he paid off the driver. Secure once more, he wandered aimlessly into the leafy quietude of Manchester Square in the nostalgic hope of recapturing his earlier mood of conjecture, so wantonly laid waste by his ten ruinous minutes with Delia. Twice, three times and a fourth he sauntered round the green garden with the sumptuously rustling plane trees, four times past each of the tall, tranquil houses invested with the serenity of another age, but it was no good, she had laid in ashes his soaring thoughts, and out in the grey June evening he felt only chill and flat and stale and infinitely lonely.

Already the staff nurse had receded so far away that he hardly believed any more in her existence. And Nicholas, quietly sleeping in her care, was no longer a source of anxiety. Even Una's memorial had ceased to trouble him. He supposed, rather remotely, that Earl Grossman would in time grow tired of his preposterous project, or that eventually they would reach some sort of mutually convenient and inoffensive compromise—a plain marble cross, or maybe a Celtic one in granite—"Suitably inscribed, of course," he murmured, saddened by his own mock-cynical indifference.

Una was dead indeed. She who had filled him, possessed him so completely only twenty-four hours before and

again at his desk this afternoon, with her memories, ideas and dreams that had lived on after her body. Una was dead, dreams, memories and all. Where was yesterday's consummation now? He was numb even to a conventional sense of bereavement.

Once before the numbness had closed in upon him. He could recognise its familiar, sinister symptoms—the spiritual apathy, the clinging staleness, the self-disgust. Four years before in Italy he had found himself with half a dozen of his comrades in too advanced a position, cut off completely from the rest of his unit, and for a whole day and a night they had held the defile until reinforcements broke through. From the purely practical point of view of military strategy it had been child's play, for the passage between the rocks was so narrow that no more than two men abreast could possibly advance against them from below, and they were not short of arms or ammunition. It was simply a question of time, of taking it in turns to mow down the enemy as he advanced, almost singly. But the enemy never ceased to advance upon them the whole day through. With the piteous, inane persistence of sheep flocking into the slaughter-house, he choked and sickeningly glutted the gorge with his soft, slimy corpses.

Christopher left the square and turned eastward towards Tottenham Court Road. At St. Giles's Circus he hesitated and then plunged into the dim, wall-eyed High Street, through the churchyard and into a shadowy backwater off Charing Cross Road. He stopped before one of the ephemeral Levantine eating-places whose windows were draped with greying butter-muslin held back with bows of smutted baby-ribbon. Just inside sat a woman, young, solitary and too fuddled to guide her fork to her mouth. The other diners munched away unmoved, too deadly world-weary to be more than

aware of her. She aroused no compassion, no amusement, no curiosity even. She was accepted.

He turned away from her vain fumbings and came out into Charing Cross Road. The aimless detour he had made was indicative of his wretched state of indecision. Four years back in the tawny, vibrant Italian hill-town with his companions in battledress the thing had seemed no more than the inevitable conclusion to their time of stress, the natural outcome of their relief and elation, but here in the drab, unkempt London streets the overpowering squalor of it came uppermost.

He dragged on, aware only of the sweat^g faces behind the frosted panes of the dank pubs, and the tired, wary women who waited interminably outside at the street corners. He could sense their lynx-eyed recognition of his state of mind, and as he passed them the pitifully threadbare opening phrases made him wince. Half-way down Shaftesbury Avenue a girl stepped from a doorway, plumb in his path. Confronting him squarely she said quite simply: "Hullo."

"Hullo," he responded.

"Thought you were going to pass me by," she reproached him.

He stood there, uncertain. There was something honest and fresh and almost wholesome about her directness. They happened to be nearly opposite a theatre and at that instant his attention was deflected by the bills proclaiming EARL GROSSMAN'S MEDEA. Grossman and Euripides. What could they have to do with each other, except perhaps through Una? Una.

"Well, you might make up your mind!" the girl broke in.

He was apologetic because he felt sorry for her in her disappointment. "I—I'm on my way to the show across the road." And he added, too hastily, too gently: "Come with me if you like."

But the girl shook her head. "It's all right," she said with a jaunty pride. "My mistake." And strutted on.

The Medea. He crossed over to the theatre. It was just such an experience that he craved to combat the dread numbness, just such a deep sensation of the mind to reawaken his atrophied awareness.

Medea herself turned out to be a much publicised film-star indulging a passing fancy for the stage, and so the role had of necessity to be drastically cut to her stature, and the whole thing fulsomely over-produced and far too lavishly dressed, lit and decorated. But against the mouth-ing inaudibility of the languishing, posturing film-star was set the chorus of trained voices, exquisitely matched, delicately balanced, finely contrasted, and through their selflessly concerted anonymity the ageless, deathless fabric of the tragedy transcended its uneasy staging. As he sat aloof and frigid in the dusty twilight of the half-empty auditorium, the Medea of Euripides leaned out towards him down through the centuries, and touched him, and by her suffering he was healed.

He left the theatre determined to discover the part Una must have played behind Grossman's latest and most extraordinary presentation. He even began to identify her, as yet in a groping, intangible, nebulous sort of way, with the disillusioned and persecuted woman who in her ultimate desolation had turned so savagely upon herself and destroyed all that she held dear. Here, he felt, was the key to the mystery of Una's own self-destruction, if only he could work it out.

If only he could work it out. He reviewed all that he knew of her life, step by step. First of all her departure in glory from their duck-pond of a Sussex village to take up the scholarship she had won to the London Academy

of Drama, her passing-out performance as the Woman, the rainbow woman, opposite Nicholas's Blanco Posnet, her eighteen months' incarceration in one of the more brutal galleys of weekly repertory, her escape and marriage of despair to Charles. The one really understandable thing she did was her return to Nicholas, only to be swiftly followed by her final self-betrayal for Grossman, Grossman, the bloated, ambition-ridden showman, the trafficker in artists, the vulgar, insensitive materialist who had boasted, fresh from her funeral, of the jewels and furs he had bought her, who laid orchids on her coffin and was planning a monstrous memorial.

Out of habit Christopher had alighted at the usual stop and retraced his steps obliquely across the open ground of Primrose Hill, but for the first time since he had lived there he had not even glanced at his beloved terrace, though now it simmered in moonlight. He walked unseeing past the hall porter, who had folded away his evening paper. He left his desk and pursued Christopher through the vestibule.

"Mr. Hayward, sir! Mr. Hayward!" he called in a pompously confidential sort of way. "There's a gentleman waiting to see you very special. Been here a couple of hours or more."

There he was, bunched together in the corner of a vast settee beneath a straggling palm, Earl Grossman, the boisterous, the bloated boss, grey and shrunken even in the synthetically glowing reflection of the rose-tinted mirrors, as Nicholas had been a few hours earlier when Christopher in his moment of panic had thought him dying.

He was shocked. He put his hand on Grossman's shoulder. "What is it?" he said in his gentle, compassionate way.

Grossman struggled to his feet, dislodging an avalanche of glossy monumental masons' catalogues which had lain

forgotten on his knees during his long wait. He had never been spoken to quite like that since, when he was a little boy, a brickbat in the street had caught him and afterwards his mother had bathed and bound up the sore place for him.

The effect upon him now was disastrous. His fleshy lower lip sagged and jutted suddenly, like the lip of an earthenware pitcher, and he began openly to snivel.

"He's stone-cold sober, sir," confided the porter under cover of retrieving the catalogues.

"Of course he is!" Christopher retorted sharply.

"That's what I said, sir," protested the porter, blandly reproachful, as he opened the lift door for them.

Up in his rooms, Christopher settled Grossman by the electric fire and poured him a drink.

"I had a Turkish bath, too," Grossman said at last, trying to pull himself together. "But it never did me any good. Never did me any good."

"I was at one of your shows this evening," Christopher remarked, to rally him, but he only answered apathetically:

"That so?"

In the silence that followed, Grossman ventured suddenly: "I can't find where it hurts. If only I could put my finger on it."

"It's on your mind, isn't it?" Christopher suggested.

"Shouldn't be. I never touched her, did I? Did I?"

"No."

"Well, then, why do I feel like I had?"

"Do you?" asked Christopher. "Is that really how you feel?"

"I think I know what's the matter with me," Grossman announced with ponderous pride. "Yes, I think I know what's the matter with me."

"Yes?" Christopher prompted.

"I got grief, Mr. Hayward. That's what's the matter with me. I got grief."

Christopher looked at him searchingly for a moment and then he said, wondering at the unsuspected truth he had discovered: "I believe you have, too, Mr. Grossman. More than any of us."

"It's not a very comfortable thing to have, either."

"It never is when it's real."

"It's real all right, it's real."

And he stirred with the point of his shoe the catalogues which Christopher had piled on the floor beside him. "You can put them all in your waste-paper basket," he said. "Put them all in your waste-paper basket. I came here to discuss that memorial with you, but I don't seem to be able to work it off that way either."

"Tell me about her instead," Christopher suggested.

"Yeah, maybe that's the way," Grossman agreed heavily. "Maybe that's the way. And you're easy to talk to, somehow. I suppose it's because you weren't in with her as deep as the rest of us."

Christopher no longer resented the implication as he had yesterday in the train. Grossman's exclusion of him from the other three gave him the same withdrawn, omniscient feeling of Olympian serenity which had come upon him at tea with Charles and Delia in the restaurant at Waterloo. He was curious to observe the antics of this poor puppet also.

"She was all the world to me," Grossman began jerkily. "And I wouldn't have harmed a hair of her head, not for a million dollars, not for a million dollars. I worshipped the very ground she trod on. She could twist me round her little finger. Nothing was too good for her. She was all the world to me, all the world to me."

Christopher waited for the piteously creaking conveyor-belt of time-worn clichés to come to a standstill.

"Yes, of course," he said, "of course. But what do you remember her by? How does she come back to you now?"

Then Grossman said a surprising thing:

"I've caught her sometimes looking at me, kind of secret and private, looking at me as though—" But he couldn't say it.

"Yes?"

"—as though I'd struck her. Yeah, that's how she'd look at me. And I've never realised it till now. Often I used to try and figure out what was going on there behind those eyes of hers. As though I'd struck her."

Christopher was silent.

"But why should she? Why should she?" Grossman burst out. "She knew I'd rather have cut off my right hand than harm a hair of her head. She knew she was all the world to me. She knew—"

The worn conveyor-belt had jerked once more into motion, and to stop it Christopher thrust in irrelevantly, almost callously:

"What made you put on the Medea?"

"Eh?"

"The Medea. I saw it tonight. What made you put it on?"

"Oh, that Greek show. She had a fancy to see it billed with my name, so I put it on for her."

"You did all that—for her?"

The stark simplicity of the man startled him.

"But she never lived to see it. Never lived to see it."

And Grossman began quietly to snivel once more.

Again Christopher rushed in to the rescue: "Do you think she wanted to return to the stage?"

"I'd have given her the lead, but she wouldn't have it. No reason. Just shook her head."

"Odd how she seemed to set her face right against it. That was her life."

"No life for a lady."

And once more Christopher was shaken by a sudden revelation of the man's mind.

"Do you know," he said wonderingly, "I've never thought of Una like that."

"Like what?"

"A lady. Just a lady."

"You wouldn't. Because you're Class yourself. You'd just take her for granted."

"Yes. I suppose that's what I did do."

Grossman's affliction had hardened to resentment.

"You've been nicely brought up and educated and protected, protected all your life. You've never known what it is to have to go all out for anything. You've never had to grab what you fancied, like I have."

"No, you're right," Christopher said slowly, thinking of the pink-and-white, blue-and-white staff nurse, of Una's child's secret in the chalk-pit, and finally of Una herself. "I seem to have missed everything I might have had. Just let it all go by. Like Wimbledon Station, yesterday."

"Just like Wimbledon Station." Grossman had grasped the significance of the simile. "Her too?"

"In a way."

"What way?"

"I suppose that, growing up together, I got too used to her being always there. I was content with things as they were and made no effort. And then suddenly it was too late."

Grossman looked at him in lethargic despair and said ponderously, painfully:

"You've beaten me to it, young fellah, I shouldn't wonder. I've been doing a bit of figuring out today, and I've found out a thing or two I didn't know before. You can grab as I have, but it don't always mean you've got it, see? It don't always mean you've got it."

He turned away from Christopher and once more his bulky form seemed to shrivel in the chair. "Looked at me as though I'd struck her," he repeated. "Struck her."

He sighed, a rumbling cataclysm of a sigh that came from a long way off. Then he reached for his hat and was gone.

VII

WHEN PEOPLE asked at parties what Charles did, Delia always replied with one of her set pieces: "Well; darling, by and large it's something to do with insurance, only I always get the name wrong and say undertaker when it should be something quite, quite different. And then in his spare time he's busy learning to be a company director. So brave and enterprising of him I always think! Just like the old merchant adventurers in Queen Elizabeth's time. Only instead of the Spaniards it's this terrible, terrible Government he's up against all the time, poor lamb! There he sits all day long signing things his secretary puts on his desk. Such a bore! I can't think why they don't get him a rubber stamp and then the office boy could carry on when he gets tired. No, darling, I simply don't know another thing about it, and I don't think Charles does either, do you, darling?"

And in the laughter that invariably followed neither of them was ever aware quite how near the truth she had ventured.

Although he had been demobbed only a year, Charles had already become so attached to the comfortable but dignified office that had been allotted to him in the City that he had come to regard it as a second home, a sure, unchanging refuge from the inconstant tempo of post-war life. It was preferable in every way to returning insecurely to Cambridge and attempting rather half-heartedly to pick up the threads once more after seven long years of intellectual stagnation at Abergavenny, at

Weedon, at Catterick, at Cairo and, finally, at Whitehall. Might as well face it, he'd never make the Bar now. A chap couldn't serve King-and-Country and his own interests as well. So it was good-bye to the Bar and hurrah for the City. Actually, of course, there was no need for him to do anything at all, but in times like these a chap simply had to pull his weight in the community some old how, if only to show the dam' Government they weren't the only ones and it had all been done before they ever thought of it—part of the Opposition Programme, in fact, always had been. And besides, look at the yield on investments just now, redemptions right and left and a niggling two and three-quarters on the new issues. And then look at the rising cost of living and the scandalous way wages were following it. Well, a chap had to do something, dash it all, couldn't just stand by and watch the whole of his income swallowed up in the hare-brained schemes of this gangster Government, and his capital too. The exchange and expenses on those furtive eve-of-Budget transfers to the safer regions of the Sterling Area were beginning to mount up, and so was the loss of interest when, no capital levy having been announced after all, the funds had hastily to be cabled back again within the week for re-investment. England was no place to live any more. South Africa, perhaps. There at least the whites were whites and the blacks blacks. Leisure was leisure and sweat sweat. None of this crazy, unholy mixture of the two that had grown up of late over here. It was worth considering, settling in South Africa where good things were plentiful and labour cheap—at least until the next General Election and the Old Country was fit to return to once more.

In the meantime it was the City for him, strictly *pro bono publico* and all that, of course, but still the City.

He found consolation in the gleaming bow-fronted

wardrobe in the corner of his room, which every morning at ten o'clock or thereabouts received his hat, his gloves and his umbrella; in the warm, deferential pile of the red Turkey carpet underfoot, and in the faded sporting prints and the old ship's clock that hung on the pea-green walls. He was at ease in his oiled, upholstered swivel-chair, secure behind his massive morocco-covered writing-table, upon which rested an elaborately-wrought brass inkstand, a too plentiful supply of yellowing blotting-paper and a pair of imposing but functionless crystal paperweights. There was a double set of commodious drawers which held his private books of reference—his English Dictionary and his Railway Guide, and his rapidly accumulating Old School and regimental magazines which, with the exception of the front page of *The Times* and the whole of the *News of the World*, constituted the only literature he now read. Tucked away in the inviolable fastness of a locked and secret drawer reposed, in their season, his football pool coupons.

Here, where Una had never set foot, his peace was secure.

On the second morning after her funeral there came the usual discreet tap on his door at eleven-thirty or thereabouts, and the staid, middle-aged secretary, who had passed into his service together with the mahogany pieces, the Turkey carpet, the sporting prints and the old ship's clock, entered with his first batch of signing, left over from the day before. He greeted her with his habitual note of pleased surprise and cultured cheer, which from the first had won for him the complete indulgence of his staff.

"I say, Miss Prendergast, all those?"

"They look more than they are," she responded encouragingly, much as a governess persuades her favourite to be a good boy and persevere with his sums.

"My wife says you ought to plonk a rubber stamp on 'em for me," he remarked sunnily. "By the time Friday comes round my right arm is nearly crippled. Beginning to affect my squash, you know."

She smiled in ever-ready sympathy, standing by with the blotter. Then, when she had collected them up again she said: "By the way, Mr. Hankey, my successor has arrived this morning. Shall I send her in?"

"Your successor?"

"Mr. Hobhouse engaged her for you. You hadn't forgotten I retire on the thirtieth?"

"Engaged her? Oh, but I say, that's a bit final, isn't it?"

"You'd seen her when she came for an interview about a fortnight ago, but she only let us know definitely yesterday afternoon on the 'phone after you had left, and as time is getting so short now and—and—well, there's no denying it, experienced secretaries are rather difficult to come by nowadays—" She broke off with becoming modesty and looked across at him, coaxingly. "And she really does seem very capable even though she comes to us from quite a different line of business."

"Oh? What was that?"

"The show business. You may remember she was with Earl Grossman."

Earl Grossman.

The bow-fronted wardrobe tottered in its corner, the sporting prints and the old ship's clock faded altogether, the Turkey carpet receded from under his feet and his massive, mahogany fortress crumpled before him like a card-castle. Round he spun on his oiled, upholstered swivel-chair, higher and higher, until everything went out of focus. "Just like one of those dam' silly psychological films," he thought angrily.

Una was within the gates.

"Why not?" she said, mocking as always. "A discarded secretary for a runaway wife. That's fair enough."

From the uncanny heights to which his swivel-chair had shot him he said dizzily: "All right, I'll see her."

But his voice had lost its schoolboyish enthusiasm and his secretary thought he must be sulking, so she gave him one of her brightest nurse-y-nurse-y nods before she went, quite unaware that she, too, had long since faded into the pea-green walls along with the sporting prints and the old ship's clock.

Gradually the swivel-chair stopped spinning, the wardrobe and the writing-table emerged once more, solid, stationary and secure as ever, the thick tepid pile of the Turkey carpet flowed reassuringly back beneath his stranded feet, and there were the sporting prints unblinking on the walls, and the old ship's clock, as though nothing had happened. Everything was back in focus.

Ten minutes later, at the conclusion of the interview, he heard himself saying easily, charmingly as ever: "Afraid you're going to find it rather dull here after the show business, Miss—er—Miss—"

"Matthews."

"Miss Matthews."

"On the contrary, Mr. Hankey, I could wish for nothing better, I'm sure."

"Found the show business rather too exciting, eh?"

"Too—personal, shall we say?"

"Oh-ho!"

Oversensitive of her new-found dignity to match her coveted City appointment, Maidie shot him a discreet ocular rap over the knuckles. Then she continued, unruffled:

"One was apt to find oneself involved in other people's private affairs, if you know what I mean. Far too easily. Callers who mustn't meet, for instance. Such manœuvrings

to get one of them out before the other could be allowed in! Most distasteful I found it, and I'm sure you will agree."

Cowed by her show of severity he said nothing but inclined his head sympathetically.

"And only yesterday I was asked to go through a whole pile of catalogues and select a suitable tombstone for a certain lady who came to rather a sad and mysterious end."

"How large exactly *are* life-sized angels? Does anyone know?" he heard Una quote maliciously, while Miss Matthews continued steadily, vindictively unaware:

"An open verdict, the jury returned, but I should say it was suicide, if you ask me. Or worse."

"Oh, really?" Charles murmured, hastily rising. "Well, I can assure you, Miss Matthews, you're not likely to run into anything of that sort up ~~here~~, what?" His celebrated schoolboyish charm had a new and ghastly brightness to it as he smiled and nodded his new secretary out. At last the door closed securely upon Miss Matthews.

But not upon Una.

He found himself waiting, listening in dread for the thin, tingling mosquito whine of a tone with which she used to puncture and deflate his self-complacence. There it was, at his elbow: "Nothing of that sort up here. Nothing distasteful. Just suicide. Or worse. Worse."

Murder, she meant. Murder. Just what he'd begun to suspect himself on Waterloo Station. But Hayward had identified the body, been at the inquest. Hayward was satisfied. Good type, Hayward. Bit high-falutin' but sound. Sound.

Murder? Not worth a second thought. Not worth a— But this woman Matthews. What did she know? Left his employ. Why? She must know something. Something the police ought to know. Stumbled on it. Rot! She had a spite on the old bounder.

But the pouncing, mosquito voice persisted: "If it hadn't been for Earl Grossman, if it hadn't been for Earl Grossman—" That's what Hayward had said.

He took refuge in the "Mess Gossip" page of his latest regimental magazine, uneasily determined not to be betrayed a second time into vehement conversation with the empty air, as he had been on Waterloo Station. Anyone could see there was no one there. Not a soul.

"If it hadn't been for Earl Grossman I might have been alive today."

Charles tried to discipline himself. "I'm not really heading for the loony bin," he said aloud. "It's only this dam' Government getting a chap down with their crippling controls and stand-and-deliver taxation and all that. All I need is a change of air. Take Delia down to dear old Monte. Plenty of petrol in France. Enough and some over to sell back to the natives and help out one's basic cash allowance. Dear old Monte!"

He reached for the telephone, but the thin, tingling whisper arrested him.

"Suicide. Or worse. What are you going to do about it?"

His panic-stricken determination crystallised and suddenly cracked.

"Nothing!" he shouted. "Nothing! Nothing! Nothing! Not a dam' thing! D'you hear me?"

He sank back again into the swivel-chair in horror at the overbearing violence of his seizure.

"Bad show, what?" he began to mutter, each of his hands closed for security over a functionless crystal paperweight. "Take it easy, now! Pull yourself together, and you'll be all right." He appealed to the mahogany wardrobe, to the old, familiar sporting prints and the ship's clock on the pea-green walls, and felt the tepid warmth of the thick red pile flow deferentially underfoot.

"No one here," he said with the pathetic defiance of a child braving the dark. "Not a soul!"

And he heard Una give one of her lingering, lethal chuckles.

"Now, look here, old girl," he reasoned, still clinging to his functionless paperweights, "it can't be you because you're dead. And buried. Buried, I said. Buried."

Silence. He released the paperweights, pulled down his rucked jacket and straightened his tie. Now for those Airways people and Monte. The telephone.

Once more the thin, mosquito buzz restrained his snatching fingers: "Buried. Only it wasn't me in that coffin. I'd escaped before ever they found my body. Escaped to haunt men's minds. As I'm haunting yours now."

"Mustn't get rattled," he muttered. "Mustn't get rattled." And he grasped the receiver at last.

"If you want me safely buried, you know how to do it."

"Number please!" the operator said.

"Whitehall 1212," replied the mosquito voice.

"My God!" Charles slammed the receiver down.

"You see?" the voice went on. "And she'll get them, too."

He took up the internal telephone: "Ask Miss Matthews to come in at once, please."

Silence once more, and a measure of security.

"Oh, Miss Matthews—"

"Yes, Mr. Hankey?"

"Er—do sit down. Make yourself comfortable. Er—"

"Yes, Mr. Hankey?"

She was all willing obedience, her eager pencil ready poised. He could still get out of it simply by saying: "Take a letter"—if only he could think of one to write.

The telephone began to ring, and through it, above it,

about it, transparently enshrouding it, came the mosquito whisper: "Whitehall 1212. Whitehall 1212."

He licked his lips, but no moisture came.

If only that 'phone would stop! Miss Matthews sat on, undisturbed. Couldn't she hear the darn thing? Couldn't she hear it? Hell's bells, was it just in his head then? Like the mosquito voice? Bells. Bells in his head.

"Miss Matthews—" He leaned forward towards her with piteously little of his celebrated charm left to overlie his desperation.

"Yes, Mr. Hankey?"

If only she'd stop saying: Yes, Mr. Hankey! It didn't get them any farther forward.

"Miss Matthews, what I am about to say to you is in the strictest confidence."

Already the telephone sounded less insistent.

"Yes, Mr. Hankey?"

"Miss Matthews, the lady whose tombstone you were asked to select was—er—the first Mrs. Hankey."

"Oh, Mr. Hankey!" She was enthralled.

"In spite of our divorce I was present at the funeral—at the express wish of the present Mrs. Hankey. And so naturally I was very interested in what you had to say just now about the verdict the jury returned at the inquest."

"I'll say you were, Mr. Hankey!"

Her enthusiasm, he thought uneasily, would soon be out of control, yet he had to go on:

"Think we might work together to bring to light and possibly put right any miscarriage of justice?"

"I could wish for nothing better, I'm sure," she replied earnestly, hugging to herself that not-so-vainly uttered threat as she had departed from Earl Grossman.

Charles glanced apprehensively at her. Already the woman looked like a bloodhound. Oh, well, at least the 'phone had stopped ringing.

The sudden silence deepened and solidified, and its relentless throbbing flattened out his brain until he could no longer remember why he had sent for Miss Matthews, what she was doing there, leaning on her elbows half-way across his mahogany fortress, eager and ruthlessly confidential.

"I could wish for nothing better, I'm sure," she was saying. Better than what? What had they been talking about? What was it she wished for?

"Well, I—er—I think that will be all just now," he ventured desperately, with his new, rather lurid smile.

But the woman wouldn't go. Instead of withdrawing discreetly, self-effacingly, as Miss Prendergast would have, she sat on looking incredulous, baulked of her prey. What was it she wanted of him? Had he refused it her? Or hadn't she reached the point of asking him yet? In his misery he stared down at the regimental magazine, open at the "Mess Gossip" page, on his desk and found comfort in the familiar face of "Tiny" Buccleuch, the regimental squash champion, nursing a couple of racquets and his silver cup. If only that woman would go he'd be all right and it would all come back to him. If only that woman would go.

But she leaned even farther across, compelling him to look up at her again.

"Mr. Hankey," she said, in a hushed, exultant undertone, "are you going to the police?"

"The police?" he repeated stupidly.

"There ought to be another inquest," she said vindictively, "with you and me in the witness-box, and then where would Mr. Earl P. Grossman be?"

So it was Earl Grossman she had fastened her claws into. Earl Grossman. The hammering, stunning silence receded and he remembered.

"Of course," said Charles flimsily, the trapped,

unwilling sleuth, "we've really nothing at all to go on, have we?"

"Not at the moment, we haven't," said Maidie, "but we soon shall have. I'll see to that!"

Charles tried again.

"It's going to be rather difficult because you see I never saw or heard from the first Mrs. Hankey again after—well, after I discovered I had grounds for divorce."

"I only saw her a couple of times in his office, but once was enough for me, Mr. Hankey. I could see with half an eye they never—well, went together somehow. If you know what I mean. Never would have if you ask me."

"Exactly," said Charles with dignity, but secretly elated on his own account. Even this secretary woman had noticed the disparity, then. He felt less besmirched.

"What we want," she went on, "is to find someone who knew her and stood by her all the time. A real pal. That young man who was at the inquest and arranged the funeral for her. What about him?"

"Oh, Hayward?"

"That's right. What was he to her?"

He to her! The vulgarity of the woman! He to her! Christopher, friend to Una. No, not that voice again, not that teasing, wisp of a voice, but just a fluke of memory. That preposterous pile of programmes Una had refused to surrender for salvage the year he came home from Cairo and they set up house for the first time together in Queen Anne's Mansions, handy for the War Office. He to her. Show business language! Right from Shakespeare's day. He to her! He ignored the trite question.

"Good idea!" he said, thankful to be able to keep to the safe, non-committal, do-nothing way. "Remind me to lunch with him some time."

"When?"

There was no escaping her.

"Tomorrow or the day after."

"Tomorrow's Saturday."

"Monday, then. Or Tuesday."

Monday was a long way off. Perhaps she'd spend a pleasant week-end. Go to a film or a theatre. The river or the sea. Whatever secretaries did with themselves at week-ends. Maybe a man. He scrutinised her. Maybe a man. And then by Monday she would have forgotten all about it, lost interest, what? he confided pitcously to "Tiny" Buccleuch grinning loyally up at him with his racquets and his silver cup.

"Certainly, Mr. Hankey," she said, backing at last towards the door in an ecstasy of mingling hero-worship and avenging fury. "And may I say how much I admire your disinterested sense of justice in leaving no stone unturned, no avenue unexplored, in this connection. Considering the grounds you had for divorce and all that's happened afterwards I do think it's ever so fine of you to be willing to go to all this trouble and unpleasantness just to set something to rights that isn't really your concern at all any more, except as a lover of British Justice. Ever so fine!"

If only she'd go! If only she'd go. With her hand on the brass door-knob she fired her farewell salvo.

"And I'll be proud to assist you in any way I can, Mr. Hankey, to get that verdict altered to at least suicide. You can count on me!"

At last.

She never heard the thin, tingling, diabolical little chuckle of the late ex-Mrs. Hankey, which echoed tortuously through the distracted mind of Mr., late Major, Hankey.

VIII

WHEN CHRISTOPHER next visited the hospital he found Nicholas in a high fever, the police in attendance and no sign of the pink-and-white, blue-and-white staff nurse.

Out in the corridor a large, bovine, inwardly-flurried, outwardly-stolid student nurse blocked his path. He tried to sidle past her, but she turned suddenly to face him, broadside on, whisking with her billowing skirts a shower of glass instruments off a trolley. She never even turned her head at the crash, accepting it as an inevitable part of her day's round. He calculated that at this rate, even allowing for her time off duty, her breakages must cost her just about double her pay. He felt very sorry for her, and therefore superior to her, which gave him quite a cock-a-hoop ring to his voice when he said: "I'd like to see Mr. Quin, please."

But she just went on standing plumb in his path and observed phlegmatically: "It isn't Visiting Day today."

"But they let me see him yesterday."

"It isn't Visiting Day today." That, clearly, was her story, and she was sticking to it.

"But it wasn't yesterday either—and they still let me see him."

She hadn't thought of that.

"I'll have to ask Sister," she conceded at last, and began to plod grudgingly towards the swing-doors, while Christopher stooped to gather up some of the glass fragments and restore them to the trolley.

It was then that he noticed the policeman proceeding steadily, implacably along the corridor, as to the scene of a public disturbance. But even so he overtook the student nurse before she reached the swing-doors. She turned aggressively and obstructed him, too, in her lurching, mistrustful, bovine way. Unimpressed, he cleared his throat, produced his notebook and Christopher heard him say: "Name of Quin. Casualty Ward."

"It isn't Visiting Day today," she parried, seeing no farther than his plain clothes.

He explained. •

"I'll have to ask Sister." She retreated through the swing-doors, leaving Christopher and the policeman together.

"What will happen," Christopher asked him, "when he recovers?"

"Are you a relative, sir?"

"No. Just a friend."

"He could do with a friend. Would you be willing to appear in court?"

"Of course. If it will help him."

"You might be able to do a lot for him there."

"I'll be pleased to do anything I can."

The student nurse was back again.

"This way, please," she said shortly. "He's delirious."

She held the swing-door open for them, and the policeman passed safely through, but as Christopher followed she lost her grip upon it and it swung violently back upon him, like a live thing unleashed, dealing him a hard crack on the nose. He remained out in the corridor, leaning against the wall, his face thrust into his hands with the sudden, blinding pain of it.

The student nurse hurried out to him, dismayed. Here was something which could not be set right simply by yet another deduction from her month's pay. In her

distress her wary, bovine mask had slipped from her, leaving her defenceless and quite human.

"I'm terribly, terribly sorry," she lamented, twisting her contrite fingers together. "I'm so dreadfully clumsy. Sister says I'll never make a nurse."

There was such a forlornness in her voice, such a desolate cow-after-calf yearning that he smiled at her through his fingers as his nose began to drip blood.

"Oh, dear!"

She snatched a wad of gauze from the trolley and led him off to a dispensary-dressing-room, where she sat him down in a wheeled chair parked by the sink while she fetched medicaments from the cupboard.

His eyes closed. It was very pleasant in the still, shady room with his head resting well back on a pillow and the mild, maternal probationer remorsefully dabbing his nose and forehead with a cool, aromatic lotion. He was very contentedly aware of her soft, plump, meadow-fragrant presence. Something like this had happened to him once before—back in his childhood when, on a blazing August afternoon, he had crept out of the roistering, racketing sunlight into the dim tranquillity of a farm dairy, and fallen voluptuously asleep in the warm, cloying odour of the cream as it dripped from the droning separator. He sighed with satisfaction and nestled his head farther into the pillow, as Nicholas had done in his safe, comfortable hospital bed the evening before. Once again Christopher slipped back into the sensual young animal he had been before Una's disturbing, awakening impact.

Una.

"I really can't have that child here any more," he once heard his mother complain. "Of course I'm sorry for the poor little thing, shut up alone with that impossible mother of hers, but she has such a hurt, accusing sort

of look in her eyes. It makes me feel quite uncomfortable, as though I was to blame in some way, which is quite absurd. And then that quiet, meaning little way she has of speaking. Not like a child at all. I suppose at her age she can't really have a second meaning to everything she says, but—well, it gets on my nerves somehow. It's so uncanny."

He remembered looking up at her from Chapter I of his new Henty on the chintz-cushioned window seat, across the gracious, enfolding comfort of his mother's sitting-room, and for the first time incredulously finding her, his mother, wanting. He remembered the hurt of it. And the misery of it was that he couldn't tell how she had failed him. He felt as ashamed of her for her well-meaning, carelessly-uttered words as he had of himself when he had deserted Una in the chalk-pit, leaving her intolerably burdened with the tears of her unshared secret.

The trouble this time had been over a doll which Christopher's mother had pressed upon her with obtuse generosity. She had come upon the two children playing upon the withered remnants of the marrow-bed which had been laid waste for the harvest festival a week or two before. In the fiery, smoke-laden, autumn dusk she saw Una, wrapped in an old plaid shawl, slowly and painfully descend from the heights of the marrow-bed into the depths of the celery trench. She was clasping to her a knotted bundle of rags.

"My dear, what *are* you doing?"

Una straightened her back and inclined her head towards her cradled bundle. Against the deep wine-glow of the twilight, a single evening star directly over her head, she might have been some Regina di Coeli of the Renaissance, with the Holy Child.

"We're escaping from Vesuvius," she announced gravely.

But Christopher's mother was unimpressed.

"What a horrid little bundle!" she exclaimed. "I hope that isn't supposed to be your baby?"

"Yes." But it was more of a challenge than an admission.

"Come indoors and we'll see what we can find for you."

"I'd rather keep this one, thank you."

"Well, come indoors anyway. It's tea-time."

Afterwards Christopher's mother fetched from upstairs a long white box. She lifted the lid to show them a life-sized baby doll. It had real hair, eyelashes, pink cheeks and china blue eyes which opened and shut. When she tilted the box towards Una the doll bleated: "Ma-ma."

"Well?" she said, in such a reckless triumph of giving that Christopher began to feel unhappy and apprehensive for her.

Una examined the hands, perfectly modelled in every detail even to the finger-nails and a baby's dimpled knuckles.

"It's very well made, isn't it?" she remarked at last, dispassionately critical.

But Christopher's mother pressed it upon her in a heedless access of bounty.

"I know you'd love to have her, wouldn't you?"

"No, thank you."

"Now you mustn't be shy, Una dear. I bought her for a little cousin of Christie's, but there's plenty of time before her birthday to get her something else."

"It's very kind of you, Mrs. Hayward, but I don't want it."

"But, my dear, you said yourself how well made it was."

"I know I did. And it is well made. But it's a *doll*. And I don't like dolls."

"How can you say that when you've been nursing that horrid little bundle of rags all the afternoon?"

"That's not a doll. That's my baby."

"Now, my dear, you really mustn't say things like that—"

"But it is. When I'm escaping from Vesuvius it's my little bambino with dark curly hair and big brown eyes, and when I'm a runaway slave it's my little piccaninny, and when I'm Mary escaping into Egypt it's the Child Jesus, with a golden halo all around his head. And I try to hide it with my shawl, like this, so they won't see it and tell Herod. But it's no good. It always shines right through."

Christopher held his breath as he saw the shocked, pained look on his mother's face.

"My dear," she said in her gentle, sorrowful way, "you really mustn't talk like that about our Lord Jesus and His Holy Mother. It's—it's quite blasphemous. And it's not very nice either."

And she snapped down the lid of the long white box.

"It would be blasphemous," commented the steadfast, unanswerable child, "if I held in my arms a painted doll that had come out of a cardboard coffin."

She got to her feet, as upright and unapproachable as she had been on the marrow-bed against the evening sky.

"I think it's time for me to go home now, Mrs. Hayward," she said, punctiliously polite, but with a faint, final reproach. "Thank you very much for having me to tea."

Out in the pungent darkness Christopher knew that she was crying. He took her arm tentatively, fearful that it would be abruptly withdrawn for the trespass committed by his mother, but it wasn't, and as she left him at her gate she said: "I don't mind so much about the others,

but, oh, Christie, I do so wish you really, truly understood!"

He waited while she knocked at the front door and called through the letter-box, and her mother came at last, muffled in shawls and holding up a guttering candle to let her in.

The others. Now they were Nicholas who had understood too well, Grossman who seemed to be stirring too late in his sleep, and poor Charles with never a glimmer yet. Nicholas, who had understood. Had he also destroyed? Nicholas. . . .

Christopher opened his eyes once more. The student nurse was only just re-corking the lotion-bottle and putting it away again in the cupboard. She came back to him, full of confidence and initiative.

"Is that better now?" she said with a nearly professional smile.

"Yes, thank you, nurse," he responded as he felt a model patient should.

Already the agreeably flustered novice had receded into time past, and in her place stood a newly competent, slightly condescending professional with whom there could be no emotional contact, no flow of sympathy.

"Good!" she said with a facile assurance. "That swing-door is much too tightly sprung. I must speak to Sister about it."

"Yes," he said faintly, regretting the yearning, contrite student nurse. "Yes, I suppose it is."

"Would you like to see Mr. Quin now?" she went on briskly, brightly, as one offers a choice of equally attractive alternatives to a small boy, "or will you come another day?"

"I—I think I'll come another day," said Christopher.

He felt weary, discouraged, beaten.

Next day he was admitted without difficulty as Saturday was Visiting Day. Nicholas, whose fever had not abated, had been removed to a small room reserved for bad cases so that he might rave in privacy and without disturbing the other patients and their visitors. Another plain-clothes man sat beside the bed, patiently and respectfully dangling his bowler between his knees, as he listened dutifully to Nicholas's interminable, incomprehensible soliloquies.

"She'll never let me go," he whimpered, piping as high as a child. "She'll never let me go. Never let me go." On and on.

"Blackmail?" suggested the policeman, cocking his head in sympathy.

Christopher shook his head. "Not of this world anyway."

"Murder?"

"Not that either."

"Tea, please," said Nicholas suddenly in a starkly normal tone. "And it'll have to be on you. I haven't got tuppence to spare this time. I need it for the gas, you see. Will twopennyworth be enough, do you think?"

"Ho, down and out," commented the policeman, back on more familiar ground.

But Nicholas went on slowly, collectedly and with blank despair: "There are some things you never can be quit of. And she'll never let me go. Never let me go."

"What *does* he think he's done?" the policeman appealed.

"I'm not sure yet," said Christopher. "Except that it's no offence punishable by law. More the sort of thing that will have to be left over until Judgment Day. That may have been what drove him to suicide."

"Attempted suicide, so far," contested the man of the law, struggling to get back into his depth.

"Yes, of course."

Nicholas fell silent.

"By the way," Christopher asked, "what's the penalty for attempted suicide?"

"Depends," answered the policeman with professional caution. "Depends on the circumstances. He could be put on probation or— That's if he's right in his head, of course," he added hastily as Nicholas began to speak again, in a voice that was not his own—husky, nasal, of the Middle West, and cracked with fear: "Sheriff: that woman aint real. You take care. That woman will make you do what you never intended. Thats the rainbow woman. Thats the woman that brought me to this."

"Christ!" marvelled the policeman. "Where does he think he is now? Ridin' the lone pine trail?"

But this time Christopher did not answer. He was looking down from the balcony of the drama school theatre at Una, wrapped once more in the plaid shawl. She was the Woman in Shaw's tenderly twisted tract, *The Shewing Up of Blanco Posnet*, the rainbow woman with the dead child. And Nicholas was Blanco.

Christopher remembered her poignantly beautiful performance, whose small beginnings he had witnessed years before on the harvested marrow-bed at home in the autumn dusk, and he exulted with her at the applause she wrung, with her stricken, elegiac evidence-giving in the court-house, from the audience of tightly critical professionals.

Afterwards, with many misgivings and much screwing-up of his courage, he ventured backstage to congratulate her, and to say good-bye. It was his calling-up papers, which he had that morning received, that finally decided him.

Intimidated by the strange, through-the-looking-glass appearance of things the other side of the curtain and overawed by the brutally cultured tones of the eccentrically got-up young men and women there and by their

exuberant vocabulary of empty endearments, he loitered wretchedly for a whole hour in the passage outside her door before daring to knock. A constant stream of people followed one another in and out again—fellow-students, he supposed, teachers, theatrical agents, talent scouts. At last the stream slackened, the last of them came out again and he knew she must now be alone. He knocked.

"Come in!" she called, with such an urgent expectancy that he shrank from disappointing her, as he knew he must.

"Why, Christie darling!" she cried in automatically mannered surprise.

"Hullo, Una," he said simply, as he always had, and instantly the mask of the theatre fell from her.

"Hullo," she responded, soberly as she used to, and again, "Hullo."

"I liked what you did tonight," he said awkwardly, inadequately, longing for the refulgent ease of the others.

"Did you?" she said graciously because she was genuinely pleased. "I'm glad."

There seemed nothing more to say, and so, after a long and tragically wasteful pause, he said limply: "Well, I mustn't keep you."

The light flickered and the doorman outside called: "Hurry up, please, miss! We're waiting to lock up."

She looked at Christopher.

"You're not keeping me, but we can't stay here any longer."

"Would you—would you mind if we went out somewhere to supper, Una?"

She was silent. She seemed to be making up her mind, resigning herself.

"Hurry up, miss, please!" the doorman outside interrupted.

"That is, if you're not already going with anyone else," Christopher put in timidly between the impatient raps on the door.

"I was," she said suddenly. "At least I thought I might be, but—"

"Everyone else has gone home! You're the only one left!" shouted the merciless doorman.

"—but evidently I'm not," she went on in heavy, reluctant distress. "So—you don't mind, do you, Christie?"

They stepped from the empty, darkened theatre out into the war-time black-out, and once again in the darkness he knew that she was near to tears. Once again he tentatively took her arm, and again it was surrendered, even gratefully he felt.

She guided him to one of the new Levantine cafés which used at that time to spring up overnight, flourish, bear fruit and, when the harvest had been safely garnered into the vaults of Nicosia or Famagusta, pass into new hands for a fresh cycle of seedtime and reaping. As the garish, freshly-daubed Larnaca Restaurant had been a failing hairdresser's as recently as last week, Una knew that she was not likely to meet anyone there from the drama school. The crowd took longer to gravitate towards new haunts.

"This place only opened today," she said brightly as they negotiated the black-out screen at the door. "I was having my hair set here last Friday."

There were no special celebrations for the opening night as the proprietor, who also served, evidently wanted to give the impression that he had long been established there and had merely been having the place redecorated. So they supped rather drearily off the inevitable minestrone followed by fish with limp chips.

Neither the food nor the raw, recking glitter of the

place did anything towards restoring them to their old, familiar level. The newly-painted emptiness gave them a stranded, castaway sort of feeling, and their conversation came in dreadfully discordant bursts of inanity.

"I'm glad you were able—"

"I'm so awfully glad you thought of—"

"I'm glad—"

"I'm glad—"

"Sorry!"

"No, do go on."

"No, you!"

"I was only going to say I'm so awfully glad you thought of sending an invitation round to me."

"I'm glad you were able to come."

"I wouldn't have missed it for anything."

"Ages since we met, isn't it?"

"Ages."

And then silence, because their poor little theme was quite exhausted. Christopher was unable to think of a fresh one, and so Una rushed in with a lot of quick, bright chatter that matched the plastic fittings and the crackling neon lights. As the result of her success that evening she had already had offers to understudy in the West End, to go into repertory, even into pantomime. She was disdainful, deprecating, but beneath the glittering mockery he sensed disappointment, disillusion.

At last, for just one instant over coffee, she showed herself.

"What did you think of Blanco?"

And, remembering the sharp expectancy in her voice when she had responded to his knock on her door, Christopher knew that here was the thing she could no longer keep to herself.

"I thought he was awfully good, too," he said in a slow, hurt way.

She had had her little outburst, and now she remarked, casually enough: "That was Nicholas Quin. You'll hear of him again some day."

But there was something so sure, so final beneath it that Christopher knew that whether he could think of anything or not there was nothing more for him to say. His having qualified at last and his call-up that morning were things that no longer concerned her.

There was nothing left now but to pay the bill and see her to her room in Doughty Street. Again he waited outside with her in the darkness, this time while she groped in her bag for her latchkey, and as they searched with his shaded torch for the keyhole he said:

"How's your mother these days?"

"As well as she'll ever be," came the tart, almost callous reply that was born of chafing despair. "And yours?"

"Oh, jogging along, you know."

"How nice for you!" She was drawing on the theatre mask again. "Well, good night. And God bless."

"Good night."

Once more she was crying, but the door slammed between them. As he turned the corner of the street he looked back at the house and a light showed for a moment from her window until the black-out curtains were hurriedly, implacably drawn. He, too, was excluded, shut out: he, too, had taken his place with the others. For he knew that whatever had happened to Nicholas that evening she had shut herself up to be alone with him, and so it would always be.

Christopher returned to his room in Notting Hill and spent the rest of the evening systematically getting his things together for the journey home tomorrow. Between the welcoming, felicitous rumour that ran about the house on his homecoming and the gentle bustle of

impending farewells, his mother managed to slip in with a great show of casualness:

"Did you see anything of Una this term?"

Grudgingly he described Una's passing-out performance.

"Oh, and what is she going to do now?"

He also spoke as casually as he could. "Rep., or pantomime or something. She seems to have quite a lot of irons in the fire." He tried, but he couldn't keep it in, either. "And there's a promising young man called Nicholas Quin."

His mother said nothing more just then, but it was her sigh of satisfaction at the danger safely past that sealed for him his exile, his exclusion.

Secure in the virtue and self-sacrifice that risk nothing, it was his mother who, a year later, packed him off to find Una and break to her the news of her own mother's sudden death.

"But, mother," he protested. "It's my embarkation leave, and I can't possibly get to Bruddersfield and back under two whole days."

She smoothed his hair with her long, lingering fingers. "I know, Christie darling, but we musn't think only of ourselves. That poor child is motherless now, and quite alone in the world."

"She isn't all alone, mother," he said. "She's surrounded by friends who mean much more to her than we ever did, because you see they are her kind of people. I'll send a wire to the theatre and get them to break it to her."

"Think a moment, my darling. That wouldn't be quite Christian, would it? You were children together, you know. Just like brother and sister."

Had she meant that as a thrust to wound him, or had she in her new security really allowed herself to believe

it? She moved gently off down the herbaceous border with her shallow flower-basket and her garden scissors, deftly snip-snipping as she went, and he found himself watching her lethally accurate thrusts with misgiving as one by one her chosen victims fell neatly, submissively, into her basket for the dead woman's wreath.

She looked back at him.

"You'll just get the two-fifty if you hurry, dear," she called. And he knew that he would have to go.

But that afternoon the best train of the day was nearly an hour late in arriving at Waterloo, so that he missed his connection at King's Cross and had to travel north on one of those slow, stopping trains that meander with many mournful whistlings through the night. By the time he reached his destination it was daylight again. He breakfasted and made himself as presentable as he could, grateful for once for his battledress whose heavy shapelessness had survived the night in the crowded train so much better than his own well-cut civilian clothes could have done. Then he set off across the cobbled station yard to find the theatre.

They would be rehearsing, he supposed. He caught sight of a bill. This week it was "Tess of the D'Urbervilles," recommended as the play of the famous film, and, as an added inducement, it was conspicuously marked: "FOR ADULTS ONLY."

A woman cleaner, busy in the foyer with a bucket of such filthy water that her efforts seemed to make no difference at all to the appearance of the floor, looked forlornly up at him from the damp sacking on which she was kneeling and mutely directed him to the stage door at the back of the theatre. It looked on to a chill, grey slum.

He walked in and began to explore the place, unchallenged. The stone passages echoed to the tread of

his heavy service boots, and still no one came. He looked in upon unoccupied dressing-rooms, bleak as prison cells and about as barely furnished—a cracked mirror, a naked electric light bulb screwed above it, a deal table and a kitchen chair, in the corner a sink and a row of pegs on the wall. The place was dead and empty and forbidding as an institution—a workhouse or a reformatory. He thought of the warmth and glitter, the plush and chandeliers of the auditorium and wondered if this bleakly echoing annexe, this empty tomb, could really contain within its shell the very soul of the theatre. He was apprehensive for Una in these unpromising surroundings, until he remembered the daylight miracles she had performed years before, with a garland of weeds, a lump of chalk, a bundle of rags. He supposed, for lack of news from her, that here at last she must have found herself among her own, who understood and shared her secret as he had never been able to do.

The door at the end of the passage, which had run beneath the stage, introduced him suddenly into the carpeted dusk of the auditorium, where his noisy, alien footfalls were mercifully muted, and he was able to slip undetected into one of the stalls. A rehearsal was in progress.

The producer was saying: "Take that again!" And a brightly ineffectual little woman, with a hopping, bird-like walk that the spiny middle-aged sometimes develop, detached herself from a group of people upstage and crossed down to a rehearsal chair. She sank down upon the hard, wooden seat as though she were disappearing gratefully into the cushioned depths of a well-sprung settee.

The producer spoke again: "I see that I shall have to teach you to distinguish your right hand from your left."

And the spry, middle-aged little woman shot up from the hard, wooden chair, a harassed, exhausted girl.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm afraid I just wasn't thinking."

"Once more."

She rejoined the group and crossed to another chair.

"Out of character."

"I wasn't just now."

"Is it too much, I wonder, to expect you to be both in character and in the right place simultaneously?"

The smouldering girl suddenly flared up.

"Yes, it is! I was only given the part long after the second house last night, and I've been up till four this morning learning the lines. And it was the same last week with 'Tess,' and the week before with 'Dracula,' and the week before that with 'Quality Street.' There's no time for studying your part, no time for growing into it. No time for anything but learning lines, lines, lines!"

"Exactly. This is not a drama school but a commercial undertaking which pays you a salary and in return expects a certain standard of efficiency."

"Efficiency! That's about all it does expect! On Monday at midnight you get your part, and on Tuesday morning you deliver the goods, as per specification. This isn't a theatre! It's a bloody factory!"

The producer inclined his head in deprecation, remarking with genteel venom: "Remind me some time to ask you what you're doing in a theatre when the Government is crying out for good, strong, healthy young women to go into munitions. Remind me to ask you!"

In the following silence Christopher held his breath, but there was no further outburst from Una. She walked quietly back to the startled group upstage, while the producer sighed delicately, with a womanish satisfaction.

"Yet once more," he languished. "Yet once more. And

to save everybody's valuable time we'll take the character as read. This afternoon, to help establish what you seem quite unable to create yourself, you will put dried peas in your shoes."

Una turned on him.

"I won't! I won't! I'll never do that! Never as long as I live. Because it isn't acting, and it isn't true."

"My dear young lady," he breathed across at her, "it's for your producer alone to judge what is and what is not acting. What is and what is not true. You will do exactly as I tell you." He made his cheaply careful pause and then went on: "In the meantime, you are suspended until this afternoon, for rudeness and insubordination." And with a flourish of his fingers she was dismissed the stage. "Act III, Scene 1 again, please."

At the stage door Christopher overtook her.

"Una! Where are you going now?"

"Christie! Were you there all the time? Out in front?"

"Is he always like that?"

And he had the sudden, unexpected joy of seeing her relax into a little smile of relief and comfort in his presence.

"Not quite," she said. "But I prefer it when he's violent and resorts to language I still can't even guess at the meaning of. It's really not so bad when he loses control of himself and gibbers like a monkey. It makes you feel so calm and self-possessed. I never knew before what a tower of strength and refuge contempt could be."

Christopher was horrified.

"Let's get out of this place, Una!"

"I suppose we might as well. I've two whole hours before we start rehearsing again after lunch-break."

"But you're not coming back, surely?"

"Of course I am. Engagements aren't as easy as all that to get, even in war-time. If you don't know people, I mean. Besides, I've stuck it for nearly a year now. Might

as well go on. Someone might come up and notice me. Something might happen."

By the cold, clouded daylight she looked haggard as a girl of twenty never should look, and very, very tired. Indignantly he put his arm about her shoulders and shepherded her out into the chill, grey slum. A fine rain was beginning to fall.

"Which is the best hotel?" he demanded, suddenly so arrogantly reckless that she laughed to see the change in him.

"The Grand, I suppose. Why?"

"We're going there for lunch."

"Are we? How exciting! But what are you doing here anyway, Christie?"

"I—Let's have lunch first and then I'll tell you," he answered gravely, shocked that he had already nearly forgotten the object of his mission. But he could hear his own voice sound mysterious, evasive, elated even, and could do nothing about it.

"All right," she said, with a little sideways smile which a year ago he would have given everything to see, but now it terrified him. How was he to break the news—the other news? It was going to be the longest, bitterest meal he would ever have to sit through. The onus would be on him to talk and he had no chatter in him.

"I'm on embarkation leave," he ventured desperately. And then broke off, too late. This was the last thing he should have said. It only confirmed her suspicions. He enquired after Nicholas, but before she could even reply he knew she would only set it down to a lurking jealousy on his part and feel flattered and more inwardly exultant than ever.

"Nicholas?" she said—an affectedly mystified little echo. "Oh, you mean Nicholas Quin!"

She was thoroughly enjoying herself, playing high

comedy against the unaccustomed background of potted palms, pink-shaded table-lamps, and light, discreetly classical music, with real food. She even frivolously suggested champagne.

"You'll regret it afterwards," he warned her.

"I'll rehearse the better for it," she retorted heedlessly. He acquiesced. Perhaps it wouldn't turn out to be very good champagne: perhaps the exhilaration would wear off or fall suddenly flat, and he would be able decently to break his news after all.

"You won't really go back to that awful theatre, will you?" he asked as soberly as he could.

"Don't you want me to, Christie?" she asked him.

It was no use side-tracking: for her all paths led the same way.

She leaned upon her elbow, across to him and said with a sudden urgency: "I must go back. I can do no other but go back, because in spite of everything, the grind and the sweat and the slave-driving of it, the mud and the rust and the dark despair of it, it's the theatre. And I am the theatre and the theatre is me. And if ever I am taken from the theatre or the theatre from me, even though I may be upright still and standing on my feet, from that day on I shall no longer be alive."

She was entrusting him now with herself. There could be no mistaking the vehement intensity, the passionate honesty of the low, ringing voice. And once more he was powerless. A year ago, a year ago. . . .

They brought the champagne, and with it she slipped back into her mood of bubbling gaiety. As she sipped it she half-closed her eyes and said with guileless mischief: "Now what were we talking about? Oh, yes! Nicholas. Nicholas Quin!"

She was languishing and coquettish, full of malice and innocence too, both disarming and defenceless, arch

and ingenuous, witty, indulgent, and utterly, enchantingly feminine. Afterwards he never could recollect what shabby nondescript rehearsal clothes she was wearing, nor the way her hair was done, nor even whether she wore make-up or not: he only knew that never again would he look upon any woman and find her so desirable as this new, this magically matured and wholly unfamiliar companion of his childhood.

And yet her overwhelmingly lavish pageantry in his especial honour was not for him. In this torment of mistaken gaiety he had no power to enjoy it, to claim it rightfully for his own. He must be content to stand aside and watch it, let it all go by, as was his destiny. He saw again his mother, serenely snip-snipping at her herbaceous border, and in the midst of all the misery of his enforced abstinence he smiled at her oversure complacency: "Children together. Just like brother and sister."

At last they brought the coffee.

"Una," he said with brutal abruptness because by now he was panic-stricken, "I've got some rather bad news for you."

"Yes?" she wavered, and he could see that she thought he was simply being facetious to hide his bashfulness.

"I ought to have told you at once, but I didn't think it the right time or the right place to break it to you in that mausoleum of a theatre," he tried to explain, "so I brought you here."

"It's the news that matters, not where it's told," she said. "But I do appreciate all this, Christie." And with one of her easy, rippling gestures that conjured effortlessly before you whatever she happened to have in mind, she indicated the festive lunch-table. Beneath her hand it could have been a wedding-breakfast.

He was enmeshed: the more he struggled, the deeper he went.

"Una," he said at last, baldly, "I've come to tell you that your mother is dead."

"What?" she said.

"That's why I've come. To tell you your mother is dead."

In an instant she had recovered, but not before he saw, to his chagrin, how painfully she drew her mantle of pride over this fresh wound of disillusionment.

"How did it happen?"

And he knew she was asking him only to gain time.

"It was an accident. Her clothes caught fire. A shawl and a candle. In the middle of the night. She ran out into the road. A soldier was passing in a jeep. He stopped and beat out the flames and took her to hospital. She died there in the morning. That was yesterday."

He stopped and drew breath, thankful that the brutal recital had come to an end, mortified by his dastardly clumsiness.

She was sitting bolt upright, staring across the table, staring past him, at nothing. "I see," she commented.

"Cry if you want to, Una. Don't mind me."

Was this all he had to say to her? The dusty, smothering shame of the chalk-pit came wafting back to him through the years. He had failed her once again and was only too wretchedly aware, as he had been then, of the blank, stupid reflection in his face that came from the heavy dismay in his heart.

But she still wasn't crying. She seemed to be thinking, assimilating a new idea, examining it, and as her thoughts ran on the words came stumbling so far after that what she was saying had no connection at all with the fast maturing idea.

"I always warned her about those shawls of hers," she said. "And the candles too. There was no need for them. And the endless cups of tea and messes she'd get

for herself in the middle of the night. There was nothing wrong with her. The doctors said so again and again. Except, I suppose, that she was perpetually sorry for herself. I always hoped she'd come to believe them and we'd be able to go back to living—well, like you and your mother, like everybody else. But now she's let it destroy her, and it's all over. Finished."

Was this all, Christopher wondered, startled, was this all she had to say, to feel about the tragedy. They said it was bad for you if you didn't cry at times like these. He stared on at her across the crumpled cloth, the empty glasses.

But now she had caught up with herself, the words with the idea.

"Oh, Christie," she burst out, "it's so much worse when it's someone you've always missed loving, someone you should have loved and couldn't. Because afterwards there's nothing left between you. Nothing. She's just gone. Like a puff of smoke. As though she'd never been. And left nothing behind. Nothing." Dry-eyed still, she whispered: "I'd sooner suffer pain than numbness."

He was old enough, mature enough now to follow the flashings of her quick mind, but his new understanding did not provide him with an answer.

"I wonder," she went on, "if I shall be the same when I go. Just vanish without leaving a trace. As though I'd never been."

He felt the indirect reproach and suffered under it. Then, by a lucky chance, he remembered the last time she had spoken of her own death.

"How could you?" he retorted with inspired lightness, "when you once threatened never to die—just to spite me?"

The linnet's nest and the starry, white flowers of the hedgerow were a far cry from the hapless luncheon-table



of the Grand Hotel, but he knew from her eager surprise at the allusion that they existed for her still. She solaced herself in talk of them, of the chalk-pit and Timothy, of the fiery sunset over the devastated marrow-bed and the doll in the long white box, of the Crusader in the church.

"Neither of us will ever go out into nothingness," she remarked. "We *did* things, didn't we? Things that go marching on."

"Things that go marching on," he repeated proudly after her.

She smiled.

"It was good of you to come all this way just to break it to me," she said, "when you could so easily have sent a wire."

"I very nearly did," he confessed. "Because I was so afraid I'd have become almost like a stranger to you after—after your friends in the theatre."

"But I have no friends in the theatre," she replied. "Not a single one. Only the theatre itself."

"You're not still going back now, are you?"

"Of course. I'm playing Tess tonight anyway."

"Say you're ill and come home with me. Mother'd love to have you for as long as you'd like to stay."

But she didn't even bother to answer. She just smiled and offered to see him off at the station.

"You mustn't be asked where you're going, I suppose?" she said as they waited for his train to come in.

"I don't know myself. The Middle East or India, I suppose. Where else is there?"

"Write and let me know when you get there!"

"Oh, I'm afraid I couldn't possibly divulge that!"

"Just say elephants or camels."

"All right. Will you write back?"

"If I've anything to say."

But it was his mother who enclosed in one of her

weekly letters the cutting from *The Times* announcing Una's marriage to Charles.

"I thought you said his name was Nicholas," she wrote.

Nicholas was raving again. Under the bedclothes he was twisting and turning, and as he tossed he mumbled, on and on and on: "... right over the top. In Charles's Humber. Charles's Humber. Street-lamps and litter-boxes and villas and elderly ladies with dogs. Elderly bitches with pubs and sewers. Pubs and sewers. In Charles's Humber. Charles's Humber. . . ."

"Who's he?" asked the patient, puzzled policeman.

IX

AT EXACTLY three minutes past ten on the following Monday morning Christopher received for the second time a 'phone call from Maidie Matthews.

"Good morning, Mr. Hayward. This is Miss Matthews speaking for Mr.—"

"Oh, good morning, Miss Matthews. I'm very glad you rang me. I've been wondering all the week-end how Mr. Grossman is."

"Mr. Grossman?"

"I hope he's feeling better now?"

"I really couldn't say, Mr. Hayward. You see, I—"

"But surely you've seen him since—when was it?—since Thursday? The day after the funeral?"

"The fact is, Mr. Hayward, I'm no longer employed by Mr. Grossman, I'm very glad to say. Not since last Thursday afternoon, I haven't been. And I'm speaking to you now on behalf of my present employer, Mr. Hankey, Mr. Charles Hankey."

"Oh, indeed? Quite a coincidence, if I may say so, Miss Matthews."

"The Hand of Providence, I'd rather think of it as, Mr. Hayward."

"Hand of providence?"

"The Hand of Providence, Mr. Hayward. No less. And I shouldn't worry about Mr. Grossman, if I were you, Mr. Hayward. I shouldn't be in the least bit surprised if he was on the run by now."

"On the run?"

"Yes, Mr. Hayward. And that's what Mr. Hankey would like to discuss with you, in the strictest confidence of course, if you would be so kind as to meet him for luncheon at his club today."

And so it was arranged, and poor Charles trapped.

Pink and fresh from the country he arrived, as usual on a Monday morning, only just in time to go out again to lunch: so he didn't bother about the bow-fronted wardrobe, but tossed his hat and gloves on his desk and his umbrella on the swivel-chair, perching himself debonairly upon a corner of his mahogany citadel to deal with his personal mail, which consisted of the summer number of *The Houndellian*, and to await the customary discreet tap upon his door. He looked fondly across at the mahogany wardrobe, at the pea-green walls with the sporting prints and the old ship's clock, at the oiled, upholstered swivel-chair and down at the smiling, obsequious Turkey carpet. All present and correct.

But one of the crystal paperweights was no longer functionless. It now held in place a neat slip of paper which read: "Luncheon appointment with Mr. Christopher Hayward—12.45."

Then came the tap on the door—not the deferential one he had been accustomed to, but a good smart rap from the implacably efficient Miss Matthews.

"Good morning, Mr. Hankey. I've got a taxi waiting outside for you."

"What, what?"

"That luncheon appointment. I managed to fix it—er—arrange it for you."

"Oh, but I say—"

"You did say Monday or Tuesday."

"Yes, but, look here—"

"I'm afraid it's too late to put Mr. Hayward off now. He'll be on his way."

She gathered up Charles's hat and gloves for him and shut his umbrella away in the wardrobe.

"You won't need this today, Mr. Hankey."

He tried to gather the remnants of his independence and free-will about him.

"I—cr—I'll be back about two," he announced.

"No need to rush it, Mr. Hankey. There's very little in today and no appointments. Good afternoon."

He was escorted off his own premises. Even the taxi-driver had been instructed where to go and how many minutes he had left to get there.

Christopher met his reluctant host on the steps of the club.

"Hullo, Charles! What's all this about the hand of providence?"

"Oh, hullo, old man. Let's talk inside."

Inside there were drinks and then the lunch to be ordered, and then the drinks with the lunch. There were, in between, endless acquaintances to be nodded to or pointed out to Christopher, and equally endless, pointless stories about each one of them. At last, as the torpidly factual corpse of a conversation began to grow cold over coffee, Charles, who seemed to Christopher to be nerving himself for something, remarked as though he were getting down to something momentous: "Wizard weekend. Get away?"

"No," said Christopher, thinking of the previous one.

"Oh, bad show, bad show! Delia and I went down to some people on the river. Got a place at Henley."

"Good show." It seemed to be the right answer, but a long silence followed. Charles spent every one of the next sixty seconds stubbing out his cigarette.

"Well—" he said, unsuccessfully imitating the lazy, casual tone he'd heard Delia use to discard a guest gracefully.

"Well, Charles," Christopher countered, rooted firmly in his chair, "how did you come to engage Grossman's secretary?"

"Look here, what's she been telling you?"

"Apparently the hand of providence directed her from his employ into yours."

"Not as far as I'm concerned! Ghastly woman. Got a bee in her bonnet about Una and Grossman. Dragooned me into lunching with you here. So that we could talk about it. Only there's absolutely nothing to talk about. Dangerous woman. Ought to be locked up. Locked up."

"Well," said Christopher, rising, "I mustn't outstay my welcome."

"Oh, not at all, old chap, not at all. Thoroughly enjoyed your company. Like to see a lot more of you. Come and dine with us one evening. Make it a regular date. Sorry about that woman. That's the kind of secretary you get these days, under this dam' Government. Bee in her bonnet. Bee in her bonnet."

"*You've got a mosquito in yours, Charles.*"

"Are you feeling all right, Charles?"

"Oh, never fitter, old man, never fitter," Charles babbled at random. "Thinking of running across to Monte. Nothing like Monte when you're run down, you know!"

"You might as well tell me what's wrong with you, Charles. Your new secretary started to."

"That woman! I—I'll tell you what, old man, if they don't let me sack her, I—I'm going to shoot her! Bees and all!"

"*You said you'd shoot me, too. Hundreds of times. But I saved you the trouble by walking out on you. I walked out on Nicholas too. But what about Grossman? Eh, Charles? What about Grossman?*"

"Will you be quiet, you damned mosquito!" Charles's high, craze-cracked voice clarioned out above the

decorous undertones of the coffee-room conversation, very much as a stridently tenor saxophone might suddenly obtrude upon a Bach partita. But the well-bred partita went steadily on. Not a head was turned. Not one false note. Only a new waiter dropped his tray.

Charles stared about him as pathetically as a habitually good child who has somehow inadvertently misbehaved himself before company.

"What is it? What did I say?" he implored. "For God's sake tell me what I said!"

"You weren't speaking to me," Christopher replied as though nothing had happened. "It's a wonderful afternoon. Let's go out into the park."

All the way along Pall Mall Charles hung upon him, as a beggar importuning him.

"What did I say, Christie? What did I say?"

"You only told someone to be quiet."

"Oh," he sighed with relief. "Was that all?"

"Has it ever happened to you before?"

"Once or twice. Only the last day or two, you know."

"Since the funeral, in fact?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"I wonder what makes you do it?"

"I get buzzing noises in my head. Catarrh or something. Caught cold in the churchyard."

His servile, cringing eagerness to be believed, to believe it himself, embarrassed Christopher more acutely than the outburst at the club.

"Have you seen a doctor about it?"

"Doctor? What can he do? It's this beastly diet the Government keeps us on. Too much starch and not enough good red meat. And the climate of course. Good mind to chuck it all up and take Delia out to South Africa. Everybody's doing it. This country's played out. Played out."

"It's like a mosquito, is it?" Christopher questioned him.

"How did you know?"

"You said so yourself. You said: Will you be quiet, you damned mosquito!"

"Did I?" said Charles sheepishly. "Well, there you are, you see."

"A mosquito. A sort of tingling whisper that ends in a pouncing sting."

"That's it! That's it!" cried Charles, overcome with relief. "So you get it yourself."

"No," said Christopher. "She doesn't come back to me like that."

"She?"

"Una. I've only heard her use that tone in self-defence when we were children at school and the others persecuted her."

Christopher's calm acceptance of the disembodied voice sobered Charles and terrified him into silence. Here was no sane, reasonable sort of chap to help him pooh-pooh the whole thing for the utter rot it was, but a fellow-lunatic to drag him deeper yet into the pit.

They walked on through the palace yard and out into the centre of Green Park. Christopher broke from the path and led Charles up the grass slope of a tree-crowned knoll. Two green chairs were set beneath the trees. As they sat full in the high June sun, with the rustling leaf-shadows streaming out behind them, Christopher observed—harmlessly enough: "This ought to do your catarrh a lot of good."

"Dry it all up, eh?"

Down in the long grass beneath them two lovers kicked and tumbled. Charles looked away, but Christopher stared straight at them.

"What made you marry Una?" he said.

"Oh, the war, you know, the war," said Charles vaguely. "And she used to be quite a pretty little thing in those days. All alone in the world. Just lost her mother. Rather touching, don't you think?"

The girl in the grass stifled a protesting giggle.

"Disgraceful!" said Charles. And Christopher noticed that he had aged suddenly as he spoke. Aged without maturing. A wizened, baby Blimp.

"We've all done the same, somewhere or other," said Christopher wearily.

"But I married her," Charles retorted.

"I shouldn't boast too much about that, if I were you."

"But, hang it all!"

"Oh, why did you have to go and *marry* her!"

"Well, as things turned out I needn't have really, old boy. Ironical, eh? Considering all the trouble I had with her later on!"

If only he knew it, Christopher thought, he had suddenly become as vulgar as Grossman. Worse. Vulgarity became Grossman, fitted him like his pants, but on this expensively nurtured, pink-and-white schoolboy of arrested development it sat indecently.

"Well, that's life, I suppose, as these philosopher chaps are always saying. But you see the regiment was ordered abroad immediately afterwards. And how was I to know at the time? Hang it all, as a gentleman I had to do the right thing by her, just in case, hadn't I?"

"The right thing? It sent her fire underground to smoulder in futility and in the end consume her."

"What? What? My dear old chap, you're talking as though she was a genius or something."

"Am I? We shall never know now, shall we?"

"Rot! She wasn't even the usual little actress. Wouldn't have married her if she had been. Una had breeding. Or I wouldn't have thought twice about her. Afterwards,

I mean. Why, it turned out she'd been at the same place where my sister took a course, at the same time, too. Made everything so much easier all round. Only my sister soon got over her hankering after the stage and all that and settled down again. Married very well, too. But Una! I made it quite clear to her I'd have no objection to private theatricals, in moderation of course, in a decent crowd, but if only you knew the queer set I found her in when I got back from Cairo! Acting in some shady little place over a mews off Sloane Street somewhere with that fellow Quin. That was the start of it all. Delia tells me he's tried to gas himself in a room in Camden Town. Best thing he could do in the circumstances, but sordid, don't you think? Sordid."

Christopher had stopped listening. You could only make Charles understand about things he touched and heard and saw about him. The rest escaped him.

So Christopher asked him rather abruptly how he had come to engage Miss Matthews.

"Bad show, that! Bad show. Convinced the verdict was all wrong and Grossman murdered Una."

"What does she propose to do about it?"

"Actually she seems to think I ought to."

"And will you?"

"*Will you? Will you? Will you? Will—*"

It was fainter out here. It was fighting a losing battle. He'd got Christie on his side. All the same one had to be fair.

"Must see justice done, what?"

"Justice has been done—as far as the body is concerned."

"No foul play?"

"No foul play."

"But you did say if it hadn't been for Grossman she might have been alive today?"

"I also said it wasn't her body I couldn't understand about. But as you and Miss Matthews are concerned only with the body, with the physical, the legal aspect, you may rest assured that I, who was at the inquest, am perfectly satisfied with the verdict. There was a thick sea-mist at the time, the edge of the chalk-pit was found to be inadequately railed off, and as the result of war-time manœuvres the old cart-track leading across the top had become so worn and widened that in a fog it could easily have been mistaken for the side-turning down to the village. It was Grossman's car she was driving, but she had left him forty miles away at Hindhead. That was proved indisputably."

Charles was convinced.

"Oh, I see what you mean now. It was his car."

Poor Charles! It would be unkind as well as useless to undeceive him now that his plodding mind had found peace, useless to speak to him of anything that lay outside his three fixed dimensions. So Christopher left it at that.

"How's your catarrh?" he asked.

"Absolutely A 1, old chap. You were dead right. Sitting out here's done me a world of good. I think it's all cleared up."

"No more mosquito voices?"

"Not a thing! . . . Voices? I didn't say voices, did I?"

"You looked haunted."

"By Jove, yes, you're right! Beginning to get me down, all this worry over the verdict and lack of evidence. Poor little Una! In spite of the dance she led me, I'd have been imagining next her ghost was calling on me to see her murder avenged, eh? That's what comes of seeing Hamlet. Delia dragged me there. Can't think what they had to film it for, can you?"

"Silly old Charles!" said Christopher with a gust of

compassion for the tight snug immunity of the man, and a touch of envy too. "You'll be all right now. You're going to live happy ever after with Delia."

"But not in this country, old boy!"

"In South Africa, then."

"Just until the next election—and then you'll see!"

And Christopher added, not without a touch of malice: "After all, you're made for each other, you and Delia."

So Charles returned, solaced and triumphant, to do his best to get rid of Miss Matthews and convinced that he would now have no more trouble with the bow-fronted mahogany wardrobe, the massive desk, the oiled, upholstered swivel-chair, the purring carpet or the sporting prints and the old ship's clock on the pea-green walls: and Christopher, Christopher went soberly back to Baker Street.

Old Palethorpe, *The Times* in his hand, was peering over the frosted pane in his door. As Christopher went by he tapped on the glass with his pencil and beckoned him in.

"Well, dear boy," he said, determined to overlook Christopher's unexplained lateness back from lunch, "there you are! There you are!"

"Did you want me?"

"Well, not really. Nothing in particular, you know. Though there have been one or two little things I wanted to consult you about this afternoon."

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't think there was anything pending."

"Oh, it's quite all right, quite all right. I solved them all myself, te he!"

Christopher could think of no suitably inane reply, so he said nothing and old Palethorpe went ponderously on, having had his little joke:

"Now, dear boy, those Park drawings. I know it hasn't

been all plain sailing for you this last week or two. We all have our little trials. Very trying, very trying indeed. But I must fix a time limit, say the end of this week without fail, or I'm afraid we shall lose the work altogether. Can't keep influential clients waiting, you know. Can't keep 'em waiting!"

"No, of course not," said Christopher shortly. "As a matter of fact I completed them over the week-end."

"Well done!"

"That's just the point, sir. They're not well done. I'm very dissatisfied with them."

"Oh, come now. Let me see them."

"I'm afraid you'd approve of them."

"What?"

"There's nothing wrong with them, you see."

"Well, then?"

"Exactly."

"I—er—I don't quite follow."

"There's nothing right about them either."

"But, my dear boy, if there's nothing wrong with them, they must be all right, mustn't they?"

Christopher fetched the drawings in.

"Here they are, sir. I'm afraid I've lost interest."

"Tut! Tut! You mustn't say that! Not at your age!"

"In fact I'm wondering if I ought not to give up altogether."

"What, leave the profession? A brilliant young chap like you? Have you anything else in mind?"

"Nothing at all," Christopher replied, "unless—"

Through his troubled, preoccupied mind there floated unsummoned the fulsomely over-decorated set for Grossman's Medea, and then in its place the cold, pure outlines of his own imagining.

"Yes?"

"—unless it were designing for the stage, perhaps,"

he threw out at random, more to startle the old man than because he meant it.

"The stage? The stage? My dear boy, you can't expect me to take you seriously!"

Palethorpe bent over the drawings to initial them with his slow, ceremonious flourish.

"The best thing you've ever done! Quite the best. Neat. Very neat. Just leave them with me."

Christopher made thankfully for the door, only to be recalled.

"By the way, dear boy, how are things with you? Any more trouble over the memorial?"

"That seems to have settled itself, sir, thank you."

"Well done! Well done! So everything in the—er—*graveyard* is lovely, eh? Eh?"

If only he had a trunk to waggle instead of that finger of his, Christopher thought as he closed the door behind him. But he was not yet to escape.

"Joined that tennis club?"

"Not yet."

"Well, I should get out and get some fresh air after mugging away at these drawings. All work and no play, you know! All work and no play!"

"I will, sir. Good night, then."

"That's right. Blow away the cobwebs!"

And at last he was free, free to reopen his own more intimate inquest that was concerned not with a woman's body in a wrecked car on the floor of a chalk-pit, but with the woman herself. If indeed she had destroyed herself they'd all had a hand in it—all four of them. They had all, at one time or another, destroyed something in her. Ironically it had fallen to Christopher to fail her, right through from the beginning. Charles had married her. It remained to be seen what Nicholas and Grossman had done.

X

THE DOORMAN at Broadway House asked Christopher if he had an appointment. Mr. Grossman never saw no one, not without an appointment. No, sir. Not without an appointment, he didn't. Sorry, sir, but that was Mr. Grossman's orders, sir, and it was as much as his job was worth— Would the gentleman care to try and fix an appointment now that he was here? Save him the trouble of writing or 'phoning, save trouble all round. Tomorrow, perhaps, if he was lucky. Or next day. Or later on in the week. Whenever Mr. Grossman could spare the time to see him. He would? Unfortunately Mr. Grossman's secretary was away for a few days, on urgent business up north, so he understood, but no doubt one of the gentlemen in the office upstairs would do his best for him. Glad to. It was always best to fix an appointment, wasn't it, sir? In the long run. Save disappointment and delay. And trouble all round. If the gentleman would just step into the lift—

"But I want to see Mr. Grossman himself *now*," Christopher insisted so quietly that the doorman jumped as though he had been shouted at.

It couldn't be done, sir. Really, it couldn't. Not without an appointment, it couldn't. Not unless that was — It wouldn't be from the Lord Chamberlain's Office, sir, would it?

"Yes," said Christopher recklessly. "Tell him Christopher Hayward from the Lord Chamberlain's Office."

And so he was wafted up in the lift and shown into the gilt-and-plush Louis Quinze ante-room that would have done credit to a Hollywood film.

After what seemed to be a decent interval, during which he overheard an anxious but unintelligibly murmured conference in the general office across the passage, Grossman's voice roared from the room beyond:

"Get out! Get out, all of you! I don't care if it's the old bastard himself! Get out!"

And when a further decent interval had passed and the decorous silence had healed over again, an elderly clerk with the deceptively mild air of a country solicitor presented himself before Christopher.

"I'm extremely sorry, sir," he began, with not one sign upon him of the recent scene in which he must have figured so prominently, "but Mr. Grossman is at present in conference and quite unable to see anyone."

"Did you tell him my name?" Christopher asked him. "Ah, I thought not!" And before the staid, incredulous major-domo could prevent him, he had crossed the passage into the general office and passed through it into the room beyond.

As he closed the door behind him Grossman looked up, and Christopher saw in his face the same shrunken grey-ness that the rose-tinted mirrors had sardonically reflected, but now it was intensified from the effort of the desperate exhibition of manufactured rage.

"That you?" he said, hardly audible.

"How do you feel?" Christopher responded.

"Bloody."

Christopher glanced at the chaotic litter of two days' half-opened, unsorted mail on Grossman's desk.

"But you're hard at work just the same."

"I gotta keep going. Gotta keep going."

"Would you rather I went away?"

"No! No, don't go away. Don't go away."

There was no mistaking the appeal, so Christopher sat down on Maidie's vacant chair by Grossman's desk and waited. In contrast to the period ante-room Grossman's own office was so modern that it looked more like a clinic. The furniture, with its tubes of gleaming chromium, seemed to have come adrift from some giant electro-therapeutic apparatus.

"Glad you came," Grossman resumed gradually, quietly. "Glad you came. I can talk to you. Not like the others out there. I wouldn't want her name on their tongues, see? No. Not with the twist they'd give it. I couldn't stand for that. She was different, see? Different. Not like anyone else. And Maidie saw it, Maidie my secretary. She saw it and told me the day I fired her. Told me to my face. Said she never looked right with me, like the others did. Said there was something wrong about me being with her. Something wrong. And that's what hurts, see? 'Cos now I know it was true. That's what hurts. Hurts. Like the crab."

"Wrong?"

"Yeah. Wrong. I thought maybe it was because she was Class. But there's nothing wrong between you and me now, is there?"

"Of course not." How much easier it was going to be to talk to Grossman with his little, incipient glimmer than to the eternally benighted Charles who had so pompously married her!

"I thought I'd given her everything, but I gotta find out what it was I overlooked. And I shan't get any peace until I do."

He swept up and stuffed indiscriminately into the already crammed waste-paper basket a heap of slit-open envelopes, from which Christopher alertly rescued a cheque and a contract. Grossman accepted them,

unseeing, and immediately they were swallowed up in another heap of unsorted papers, through which his hands moved back and forth with the same distressed futility as Nicholas's had on the folded hospital sheet in his struggle back to consciousness.

"Gotta keep going," Grossman muttered. "Gotta keep going, see? Keep going. That's the only way. Until I find out what it was I did to her. I'd give a lot to know. But I can't buy it, not this time. Gotta find out for myself, see? Gotta find out for myself."

Christopher seized the waste-paper basket, turned it upside down and shook out its contents on to the carpet. Then he squatted down beside them and went carefully through the discarded envelopes retrieving every now and then a letter, a cheque or a bill, which he clipped together and arranged in a neat pile safely out of Grossman's groping reach. As he worked he said:

"When did you first meet Una?"

"Eh?"

"When did you first meet her?"

Grossman's fingers ceased abruptly from their blind, uneasy fumbling and he flung back at Christopher:

"What's that to you?"

Christopher shrugged: "Nothing," he said, replacing the emptied envelopes in the waste-paper basket, "nothing at all. Only it might be as well to begin at the beginning when you're searching for the truth."

Grossman pounced upon the unfamiliar word.

"The truth! Yes, that's it! That's what I gotta know. The truth about her and me."

Repose settled upon him, and leaning back in his chair, he looked straight before him, at nothing, inwardly, so that Christopher was able to sweep off the whole of the litter from under Grossman's nose without his noticing, and stack it all in the middle of the floor. He squatted

down again and went quietly, methodically on with his sorting, seeming so absorbed in his task that Grossman lost all awareness of his presence and continued, unhampered, undisturbed:

"She'd an old plaid shawl, like the women back home when I was a lad. An old plaid shawl she'd folded over the kid that had died on her. And a low kind of voice that sounded like she was fighting to keep back the tears. Yeah, a low kind of voice. Not a sweet one, but kind of throbbing. I went backstage to see her. I remember I couldn't get there fast enough. She was like that, you see. And I offered her Principal Girl in Cinderella. Principal Girl here in the West End. Her not out of school yet and just beginning to look around. Must have been crazy. Crazy. But that's what she did to me, see? That's what she did to me." He fell silent again, a machine run down.

"And she turned you down," Christopher put in, back for the moment in the pungent glitter of the Larnaca Restaurant, hearing again her quick, bright, screening chatter of repertory and pantomime that matched so well the plastic fittings and the crackling neon lights. But he never paused or broke the rhythm of his sorting on the floor, and so his comment had the effect of a prompt rather than an interruption.

Grossman resumed: "Yeah, turned me down. No thank you, Mr. Grossman, she said, ever so quiet and polite. You see I've no singing voice. Listen, honey, I said, singers are two a penny. What do you want with a singing voice when you talk natural as husky as Garbo? Listen, baby, I'll have the part built up for acting, just for you! No, thank you, Mr. Grossman, she said, as gentle as ever, you see I don't happen to dance either. Nor does Garbo, I said, but I can have you taught. Or if you don't want to, you don't have to, not if the part's built up strong enough. But she just shook her head.

Listen, beautiful, I said, I'll have bits of Shakespeare put specially in for you. Interpolations, they call them. In the scene where they've gone off to the ball and left poor Cinders all alone with Buttons by the kitchen fire. Now what's to stop you reciting Juliet on the Balcony to Buttons and him playing Romeo, if I get the right kind of guy? Tell you what I'll do, honey. I'll buy you a Buttons from the Old Vic! Now, isn't that a swell idea? No, Mr. Grossman, she said. And it was like she was talking to some person else, way up over my head."

He stopped speaking and looked across at Christopher on the floor. "Well, there you are," he said. "That was the first time I ever set eyes on her. The very first." He heaved one of his volcanic sighs and relapsed into an apathetic silence.

"So you let her go," said Christopher from his place on the floor.

"Yeah, I let her go. . . . I let her go."

"You could have traced her."

"I did."

"Well?"

"I wrote. I wrote several times. I wired. I'd broken into straight plays by then and I offered her a part in my 'School for Scandal.' You'd think a girl in weekly rep. in a hole like Bruddersfield 'ud jump at anything in the West End. But not she! No sirree!"

From a drawer miraculously slung between the chromium tubes of his desk he produced a thin leather-bound file.

"Here you are," he said. "My letters and her solitary wire." He thrust it at Christopher. "Didn't even bother to get my name right. It's addressed to Richard Brinsley Grossman. Maidie said Richard Brinsley was the author's first and middle names and she must have kind of got us mixed up."

Christopher refrained from comment.

"Why didn't you go to Bruddersfield yourself?" he asked.

"Aw, I guess she hated my guts," Grossman said evasively.

But Christopher was ruthless.

"That shouldn't have deterred a man like you."

"I guess not. It never had up to then."

"Well, why didn't you?"

"I tell you everything was different with her." And then it slipped out. "Besides, Bruddersfield was my home town."

"That should have made it all the easier."

"Why so? And what the hell is it to you, anyway?"

"Nothing," Christopher repeated. "Nothing except a certain amount of satisfaction in getting at the truth. What really happened, what it was that made her turn on herself at the end, like Medea."

"Who's she?"

"Your latest production."

"Oh, that dame!"

Christopher sat back on his heels.

"So Bruddersfield was your home town?" he persisted gently.

But Grossman was resentful still, and suspicious.

"What do you figure you're going to get out of all this?" he said.

"Nothing," Christopher assured him once more. "Except a purely moral sense of satisfaction."

For the first time Grossman eyed him and the neat pile of letters beside him and expertly reckoned up the value of Christopher's time spent in his service.

"That don't make good sense," he said.

"That's what the Sheriff said when they told him how they'd caught Blanco Posnet, the horse-stealer, looking at a rainbow. Remember?"

"Yeah. I remember. Could have got away, too, if he hadn't gone and handed the horse over to the woman in the plaid shawl with the sick kid. Kind of big, I thought. But he acted like he was ashamed of it."

"It didn't make good sense, you see."

Grossman turned his small round eyes upon Christopher.

"You could be getting a story out of me for the Sunday Press," he observed reluctantly, with a touch of his old shrewdness. "But you ain't. Don't ask me how I know. I just take one look at you and I know for certain sure, same as I did with her. You're alike in that way, you two. Remember I took you for her brother first of all?"

There it was again! The old allusion once more struck home at him: it reached right up to his fancied Olympian immunity and brought him level again. This Grossman was no puppet with antics to be watched, like poor, dim Charles and his chuckle-headed Delia.

"I went to Bruddersfield to see her," Christopher retaliated, only to tail off with the ineffectual defiance of a boasting child: "And what's more, I took her out to lunch at the Grand Hotel!"

But Grossman wasn't listening any more. He was absorbed in himself, in his own particular quest.

"Bruddersfield's nothing like your home town," he began, resentfully, accusingly. "There's a couple of miles of double tram-lines before ever you clap eyes on so much as a blade of green grass—outside of the corporation cemetery. None of your nice genteel cottages with roses over the porch and fancy clipped hedges and honey bees humming all the day. Oh, yes, I got it all taped the days I was down there! None of your strawberries and cream on the lawn and your harvest homes and your cosy Christmas carols. My pa pushed a barrow over the cobbles. Old Clo' Moses, they called him. And me too. The kids used to sing it out after me so I got I didn't want

to go to school for fear of the half-bricks and lumps of muck they'd sling after me with it. I sold newspapers. And I swore I'd run away and change my name just as soon as I could raise the fare. I went to Liverpool and worked in a warehouse, and then I got a passage to the States. In New York I was cashier in a downtown movie-theatre, and in time I got to be called Mr. Earl P. Grossman. Don't ask me what the P. was for. I never had a second name, but I knew I was on the up-grade and it sounded kind of good. Mr. Earl P. Grossman. Well, I never looked back. Never looked back." But there was anything but prosperity in his sigh.

"Then why didn't you want to go back to Bruddersfield?"

"I told you, didn't I?" Grossman replied irritably. "I told you what it was like. Old Clo' Moses on the cobbles and the tram-lines, and the muck flying past."

"That was Old Clo' Moses," Christopher remarked. "But Mr. Earl P. Grossman was a different proposition altogether. He could have taken a magnificent revenge, with his Rolls and his chauffeur and his secretary, with his suite at the Grand and his box at the Theatre Royal. You could have flung your money at them as they once flung muck at you."

"No," said Grossman, "I couldn't have done it, couldn't have done it. Not in Bruddersfield. I knew I could never be Mr. Earl P. Grossman in Bruddersfield. Only Old Clo' Moses. Right in the Grand Hotel. Right in the Royal Box. And I wouldn't have cared for her to see me that way. No, I wouldn't have cared for her to see me that way."

"I think," Christopher observed, "I think somehow she would have liked you better for it."

"I meant to tell her some day," Grossman confessed. "Yes, I always meant to tell her. Pictured it to myself.

By the firelight, maybe, in winter with a storm outside and rain on the window-panes. And nothing could touch us. Us two. But it was never any good. I could never get down to it. Never get close enough." He broke off suddenly and then cried out: "I had her in the end. I had her, but never in the way I wanted her. And she's the only one I've ever wanted that way." He put down his head and began to snivel, and presently the tears came.

He never heard the telephone ring. He was too busy groping his way back through the barren waste of years that lay behind him, back to the lost fount that had trickled dry beneath the arid glitter of their shifting sands. And now he could feel it stirring once more, springing, flowing. He sprawled limply across his stretchers-desk, luxuriating in the completeness of his surrender.

Never mind Christie answering that 'phone, telling them outside, in the general office, No, Mr. Grossman didn't want any of them any more, Yes, they could all go home. Never mind if they could hear him too, over the wire or through the keyhole maybe. Let them think he was cracking up. Let them think he was nuts. P'raps he was. So what? This was better than a shampoo, better than any Turkish bath he'd ever taken.

He was weeping openly now and aloud, brazenly, clamorously and with all the abandon of a woman indulging herself. On he blubbered, with ludicrously porcine grunts and squeals, with obscene and bare-faced splutterings, naked and unashamed in his anguish as a child.

Christopher, who had abandoned work on the pile of mail, sat watching him with patient curiosity, waiting for the freak storm to blow itself out. Gradually the gusts abated, the pauses became more frequent and prolonged and the snuffles more furtive and desultory.

The evening silence of the now deserted building began to creep in upon them, bearing with it all the more remote of the neighbouring sounds kept out by the racket of the day. Christopher sat and listened to the lost wailings of the trains on Hungerford Bridge, the hoarse, rough sirens of the river tugs that passed underneath and, nearer at hand, the urbane, efficient toot of the brand-new water 'buses. He went across to the window and leaned out. Passengers for Putney had just embarked and were sitting on the deck, their evening papers spread in the gold and blue of the late June sunshine, waiting to cast off. From the far distance Big Ben chimed four leisurely quarters, and then, after an interminable pause, came the first of the six ponderous strokes.

Grossman was quiet now. He had raised his head to listen, seeking reassurance in the comfortable booming of the old, familiar voice.

On the last of the solid, immutable strokes, the door was flung melodramatically open and there on the threshold stood Maidie, venomously upon her righteous war-path. She advanced upon him and announced with absurd inadequacy: "I've a bone to pick with you!"

Completely defenceless, vulnerable as he had never been before, he looked up at her. And she stared incredulously back into his distorted features, back into his poor little pig's eyes sunk in their red, swollen folds of flesh.

"My!" she observed at last. "You've been crying."

"So what?"

Mistakenly this time, she thought she had him at bay.

"So it's getting you down, eh?"

"What's getting me down?" he retorted morosely.

"You ought to know!"

But already she had begun to waver, to fall back upon her flimsy defences.

"What is it you figure I've doné?" he asked, secure yet despairing.

"That's what I've come to find out," she countered smartly enough, but somehow her carefully rehearsed attack didn't seem to be coming off. It had carried such conviction back in the cloakroom of her City office, where she had retired in disgust after Charles had cravenly called off the chase.

"That's what I've come to find out," she repeated, weakening. "So's I can inform the police!"

There it was, her tremendous climax, her trump card, out long before its time. Already her threatening tone sounded empty. "Cos I think it's about 'time somebody did," she tailed off. She could feel the venom oozing fast away.

She caught sight of Christopher at the window and made a fresh effort.

"Who's that?" she rapped out with more bravado than purpose.

"That's Mr. Hayward," Grossman told her. "That's the gentleman you couldn't get on the 'phone for me." There was a disconcertingly alien strain of gentleness in his tone. "He knew her better than any of us. Better than any of us." And he clucked softly with his tongue upon his dentures, like a pious old lady with memories.

"Oh," said Maidie, her second attack also fast collapsing. "He was at the inquest. He reckons it was all O.K. I know. I heard about it all this afternoon. Disgraceful I thought it was. Two great men and neither of you with enough guts to—"

"Well?" Christopher challenged her.

"Oh, I don't know," she mumbled. "I don't know I'm sure." In desperation she turned again upon Grossman: "What's bothering you, then, if it's all O.K. like he says?"

Grossman faced her, proud and ravaged: "It's grief I got, Maidic," he said. "Grief. But you wouldn't know what grief was, would you? You never heard of grief before, did you? Except in high-class romances and such. Well, now you've seen it—grief. My grief! It ain't so pretty as they say it is, but you may as well take a good look while you can."

She recognised the latent dignity now emerging from the quivering, struggling flesh of the man, and was lost.

"Oh, I don't know," she burst out. "I don't know I'm sure. It's so awkward when you've got nothing much to go on." Her hovering glance sought refuge upon the pile of letters, and she bore down upon them with relief. "Well, I never!" she exclaimed fussily. "Fancy sorting your mail on the floor! Whatever next!" She seized the papers and transferred them back to Grossman's desk. "Looks to me like no one's done a blame thing about anything while I've been away," she grumbled. Settled in her own chair she began to look through them.

"Oh my, oh my!" she cried presently. "Here's Sir John's contract four days old and not even acknowledged! And you know how hard we worked to get him! Marked private and personal too, and ever such a nice little note in his own handwriting. You ought to frame that. Fetch something at Sotheby's one of these days. And that cheque from Dame Georgiana's solicitors. That'll learn her, silly old cat! Good job we slipped that clause into her contract. . . . Whatever's this? Couple of picture postcards and a wire from Dulcie Drury. Well, they can wait. We all know what the Tower at Blackpool looks like. . . . Oh, my goodness! That option on the Orpheum. It expires day after tomorrow. Oh, Mr. Grossman, whatever have you been doing since I've been away? Whatever *have* you been doing? I know it's marked personal, but it's marked urgent too, for all to see. You

might have let them have it outside if you couldn't handle it yourself. And that insurance premium too. All that jewellery! It's the final demand. You weren't available to sign the cheque when the others came and tomorrow's the last day of grace. We'll get this off at once if we do nothing else!"

She produced his cheque book from its place in the drawer, swiftly filled one in, passed it to the dazed, incredulous Grossman to sign, tucked it with the renewal notice into an envelope, addressed it, stuck on a stamp from her own handbag and flicked her busy tongue across the gummed flap.

"You can post this on your way out" she said to Christopher. "You'll just catch it nicely if you hurry. We'll be here until midnight, I can see."

XI

NICHOLAS WAS sitting up in bed. The fever, having passed, had left him languid as a poet in a ballet, to the unending and adoring delight of his nurses. He reclined upon far more pillows than the hospital regulations permitted, he was nearly suffocated with flowers and his locker bursting with cigarettes.

"Is that you?" he murmured, his long, slender fingers trailing like tendrils over the white sheet.

"How do you feel?" Christopher responded.

"Bloody." It was a feathery, ethereal whisper tossed off the very tip of the tongue.

"I suppose you would," said Christopher good-humouredly. "You've had a pretty rough time of it."

"They tell me I was delirious for days," Nicholas remarked, importantly casual.

"Yes, I heard you one afternoon."

Nicholas slowly opened his eyes.

"Oh, I'm so glad you did! Tell me, what did I sound like?"

Christopher smiled at the vanity of the actor.

"Nothing out of the ordinary. You just rambled along like anyone else." •

"It's not what I said, but the way I said it. Was there anything Irish about it?"

"Irish?"

"Even vaguely. You must tell me. It's most important."

"There was no trace of any sort of brogue at all," Christopher assured him.

"Absolutely none? You're quite, quite sure?"

"You once quoted a bit out of Blanco Posnet, but that was some kind of American—very good American, I thought—just as I heard you play it originally."

"No Irish?"

"None."

"Then I'm rid of it at last!" Nicholas exclaimed.

"If it doesn't even come out in delirium, I think I can safely say I've overcome it."

"Overcome it?"

"Didn't you know I was from Dublin?"

"No. I've never really thought about where you were from."

"My people hadn't the money to send me over here to school, and so I've had to sweat blood and tears to get rid of it. Trinity was a great help, of course, and then training over here for the stage. It would have been cheaper if I'd gone to the Abbey or the Gate, but then I'd have been right back where I started, wouldn't I? You see, there's no future at all for native-trained Irish actors except in Irish parts. The minute people over here connect you with the Emerald Isle and all that, they typecast you, and you're Pat Murphy all your life."

"You haven't changed your name, though, have you?"

"No. Quin's not too flagrantly Irish, like O'Sullivan or Moriarty. It's just discreetly Gaelic enough to suggest the inherent talent, the *panache* of Celtic blood—just that little extra the others haven't got, you know—provided, of course, you manage to convince them you've never seen Ireland except as a tourist."

"I should like to have heard your lost brogue," Christopher lamented. "However, I suppose I must congratulate you instead on losing it."

"The trouble is it hasn't worked." Nicholas turned his

languid palms up in resignation. "Or I would hardly be here now."

"So it wasn't Una, then?"

Nicholas suddenly lost his langour and looked alert and anxious.

"You haven't mentioned her to anyone here, have you?"

"No."

He sank back into his pillows in relief.

"Well," he said, "it's like this, you see. When I woke up out of the delirium I found a policeman sitting here beside me, busily taking notes, but I don't think they could have made any sense out of them because afterwards they came and asked me a whole lot of silly questions. Apparently I've got to appear in some sort of court as soon as I'm considered well enough. I said I did it because I was frustrated and down to my last tuppence—quite literally, because if I'd had one more penny to shove in the meter I'd be in the mortuary instead of here. But I'm wondering now whether I ought to have mentioned Una. How do you think the British Bench would react to the story of a *grande passion*?" He sighed, stretched and once more snuggled voluptuously into his pillows. "After all, all the world loves a lover."

Christopher took the precaution of thrusting his hands deep into his pocket as he bent over the bed. "And why did you do it?" he demanded angrily, baffled and disgusted by the brilliant, darting inconsistencies of the man's mind. As he turned away again he remembered the furtive coat-sleeve in the funereal downpour, the starry hedge-flowers omitted from the final tributes and, just twenty-four hours later, the hideous moment of Nicholas's return to full awareness that had so blanched and withered him that Christopher had thought him dying.

These Irish were born actors. It was part of them. They could hardly know themselves when they were acting

and when they weren't. They had no true self beneath it all, nothing that was constant, that you could lay hold of and say: This, then, is the man! This is he! Any more than you could lay your finger upon a glancing, twisting fish as it lurked in leaden shadow or leaped in radiant iridescence from the broken water of one of their own bog-dark, sun-bright salmon streams.

Nevertheless Christopher sat down at the bedside and leaned forward again, intent upon his fish. But Nicholas, turned languid once more, had closed his eyes.

"I can't remember the exact moment I decided upon it," he said. "Whether it was up on the common in the rain, or in the 'bus when I suddenly felt I might be seeing the sweep of the bank upstream from Putney Bridge for the last time and I asked the conductor for pennies instead of halfpennies for the gas—little squirt! Or it may have been the evening, the strange lavender light on the grass slope of Primrose Hill, and away in the terrace beyond the poplars someone was playing Debussy."

"Debussy? But that happened to me too. Just as the light was changing to lavender."

Nicholas opened his eyes.

"You were one of those, then, I took my last leave of." And he told Christopher of the woman darning socks, and the schoolgirl drying her hair, and the plump, maternal Jewess. "She very nearly did for me," he remarked, smiling to himself as he recalled the knives and forks set the wrong way round.

"In your delirium," Christopher said, "it must have been she you called mother." He felt as close to Nicholas now as in the train when Nicholas had leaned forward unexpectedly and touched his knee, and drawn from him the story of the white hedge-flowers. He had spiked his fish.

"And Una?" he said. "Una?"

Nicholas shook his head honestly, sadly.

"As I turned my back upon it all and crossed over to my side of the hill, with the light turning to lavender and the music floating after me, I clinked my two pennies together in my pocket and thought of the bamboo bedside table and the lino and When Did You Last See Your Father? over the mantelpiece and the stale bacon and cabbage-water that would cling about my final curtain. That was the last straw."

In a flash Christopher's fish had gone again, as a salmon leaping.

Baulked, he turned instinctively to the solid comfort of his own all-too-conscious virtue. "And I, at that particular moment," he announced, "I was filled, possessed by Una. I could feel her very presence, not just in the room but in myself, so that I became one with her and she with me. I like to think of it as a kind of spiritual consummation." He stopped to draw breath and to glance defiantly at Nicholas, who didn't seem particularly impressed. Or could he be amused? "Consummation," Christopher repeated, affronted.

A nurse put her head around the door, apologised and withdrew. And Christopher recognised his pink-and-white, blue-and-white staff nurse. Humbled, he added scrupulously: "And immediately afterwards I thought, Some day I shall have to marry a wife. Some nice girl—"

"Like Phyllis?" Nicholas observed, affably indifferent.

"Phyllis?"

"The nurse who looked in just now."

Her name. Once that had been the first thing to discover. But now it was Nicholas who had it pat.

"Or Myrtle," he went lazily on. "Myrtle, knee-deep in moon-daisies and meadowsweet."

"And always breaking something?" Christopher completed.

"Oh, so you know our Myrtle already?"

"I have met her," said Christopher, the cool fragrance of her remorseful ministrations wafting back to him.

"Yes, they're quite an amenable lot here," Nicholas remarked carelessly. "Once you get them trained to your ways. Cigarette?"

Then he resumed suddenly: "You're absolutely right, of course. About marrying some nice girl, I mean. Una would have been no good to you at all. She and I only hurt each other all the time. Sometimes exquisitely it's true, but mostly just plain damnably."

Christopher just said: "I'm sorry."

"She expected so much, you see."

"I know, I know. But I always thought you would have known so much better than I how to—well, how to avoid disappointing her."

"I?" said Nicholas. "I?" And once more the life ebbed from him. He turned his face wretchedly to the wall. "She hated sham," he whispered at last as though it had been wrung from him. "Oh, God, how she hated sham!"

There, when he least expected it, was Christopher's proud salmon, securely spiked and landed, gasping and helpless in the sun's full glare. But now that he had it, he could only recoil in dismay.

"I mustn't outstay my time," he murmured shamefacedly, "or they won't let me in any more."

"No! No, don't go away. Don't go away!"

It was horrible to hear Nicholas crying after him as Grossman had. There was something shockingly obscene about Nicholas brought low, Nicholas the high-handed, the stiff-necked, Nicholas the self-sufficient cynic. So he sat down once more on the slippery bedside chair, and to stave off any further outburst he began in hurried, nervous undertones to tell Nicholas of Una's astounding insight as a child, in the chalk-pit, and of her contemptuous

rejection of the painted doll for a humbler, nearer symbol of her ideas.

"She wasn't human," Nicholas muttered querulously. "Even then."

"Oh, yes she was!" Christopher protested, recalling the tragic high-comedy beneath the potted palms and pink-shaded table-lamps of the Grand Hotel. But he went on: "Didn't she imagine herself in love with—and marry—a gay and adoring young captain called Charles?"

"I could never understand that," said Nicholas. "Except that she told me that eleven months of weekly rep. at some God-forsaken hole called Bruddersfield had driven her to spiritual suicide. And Charles, who was conveniently stationed at Catterick, used to take a box, the same one, regularly every Saturday night. *Et puis voilà!* she would say."

"She wasn't being cynical, either," Christopher assured him. "Not really, not—" He pulled up short and bit his lip, on the brink of coming out with something he had never spoken of before. But it had to come. "There was once a moment in Bruddersfield—a lost one I'm afraid—when it might have been me. But it couldn't be. And Charles was a romantic stranger, ordered abroad."

Nicholas turned over on to his back again and lit another cigarette. He threw back his head upon the topmost pillow and stared up at the ceiling, watching the curling smoke with his dreamer's eyes, while his underlip thinned into a faintly sulphuric smile. "She didn't keep any of her illusions once the not-so-romantic stranger had returned home," he observed. This was the familiar, the characteristic Nicholas, the effigy of the enigmatic Crusader come alive, and with him Christopher was at ease.

"Perhaps they weren't all illusions to start with," he observed. "I know what Cairo can do to a man. I had a

spell there myself after I got my commission, and I saw a lot of people go under. The mellowing atmosphere was a little too much for all of us."

Nicholas exhaled another leisurely curl of smoke. "On Charles's very first evening back from Cairo," he announced, "I had the pleasure of knocking him down. Smack on the pavement of Sloane Street outside the Saturn Theatre. I never did such a thing before or since. It's not my way, and I suppose that's why I enjoyed it so much."

Christopher surprised himself by saying: "That's about all you can do with Charles, knock him down. Words are nothing to him because he doesn't seem able to grasp the ideas behind them."

"D'you know the Saturn?" Nicholas went on. "It's one of those little theatres on the fringe of the West End where they experiment with new stuff that the big managers, like Grossman, are too scared to touch until it has succeeded, and then they buy it up and retail it at a handsome profit to the West End. Well, Grossman had had his eye on our show ever since we'd had a Royal Visit. He intimated that he'd insist upon Una but drop the rest of us for Big Names. Nothing was actually settled, but I was feeling pretty browned off because it had happened to me so many times before. All part of the sordid routine. Una was a bit jumpy too, because Charles had forbidden her to go back to the stage and she was wondering how she was going to break it to him. Well, there he was, days before she expected him because he'd somehow wangled a lift by air. Typical, that. He'd seen something in the evening papers about the show on his way up from the airfield, with Una's name figuring rather prominently, but he arrived after the curtain had gone up, and so they wouldn't let him in until the first interval. That's the rule at the Saturn. When I slipped out for a breath of air and

a cigarette after my first exit, he was still stalking up and down the pavement complaining to a lamp-post and an old tom cat that these bloody actors thought they were God Almighty. I'd no idea who he was, of course—not that it would have made any difference either way, because it wasn't until afterwards that Una and I really rediscovered each other."

"Rediscovered?" said Christopher.

"We'd met before, of course, at the theatre school. We'd even played together—"

"Blanco Posnet."

"Oh, you saw it, 'did you? But we were never actually *aware* of each other in those days," Nicholas explained so easily and so glossily that Christopher found himself comfortably hating him again, only this time without the awe with which he had long ago regarded Nicholas and his fellow-students while he waited backstage for the courage to knock at Una's door. He recoiled afresh from the sharp ring of expectancy in her voice that he had dulled and silenced, as he had known he must; and once more from his lonely street corner he watched the violent darkness implacably descend between them as she sat alone in her lighted, curtained room, hugging the absent, the unworthy Nicholas to her heart.

"What became of you that evening?" Christopher asked.

"What evening?"

"Blanco."

"I really forget. I suppose I dashed off to Euston to catch the night train for Dublin. Oh, no I didn't! I'd stopped going home for Christmas even by then. I think I took some girl out. Feemy Evans."

"Feemy Evans?"

"The township tart in Blanco. I forget her real name beyond the fact that she happened to be Charles's sister

'finishing' at a drama school. I remember her people were offended by that particular bit of casting, and removed her. She was perfectly bloody in it anyway. One of these society poppets who Take Up Art. Asked me whether I thought she was destined for Motherhood or the Boards. I'd had several beers by then so I advised her to try everything once."

"Charles was telling me she'd got over all her hankerings and married very well," Christopher interpolated for Nicholas to brush aside.

"Now Una and I," Nicholas swept on imperiously, as pompous as Charles, "it was years before we were ready for each other. Years. She only really found herself, as an artist I mean, a complete being, when she came back to work in London. At the Saturn she began to fulfil herself. And then Charles had to come and snatch her away again. Of course Grossman dropped the whole thing as soon as he found he couldn't have her. Still, we'd all have been out on our necks anyway. I had to go back to touring, and occasionally reached the outer suburbs with something slightly more promising than usual, but I always knew it wouldn't ever arrive. I was the acknowledged best of a poorish lot, and so I managed to rub along all right—and fairly securely too. Rather like a civil servant or a clerk in a bank, with success always just around the corner to wait for instead of a pension. Eventually I reached Wimbledon as Warwick in Saint Joan. Do you know it?"

"Only the common," Christopher replied, deliberately obstructive. Nicholas was having that effect upon him.

"I mean the part of Warwick," Nicholas continued blandly, and without waiting for Christopher's comment he went blindly on: "It was made for me—as I was then, I mean. The most English of English parts I'd sweated blood and tears for all these years. I played it up and

down the provinces and by the time we reached Wimbledon I was revelling in it. It's definitely a part one could be noticed in too, you know. On the second night Una came backstage to see me. She said she'd come to watch the tennis with some people Charles knew, saw our bills and slipped away in the crowds. When I asked her what she thought of my performance—" But Nicholas wavered and broke off. He seemed to be searching, trying to recapture something—not a mere memory but a whole experience he had lived through. At last he said: "I expect you knew it too. That deceptively gentle incisiveness, that passive penetration of her mere presence. She sat away in the shadow, and glimmered."

"Like an evening flower in a summer garden."

"Yes," said Nicholas. "You knew her. You knew her too." And yet again they were as close as at the moment he had leaned forward in the train and touched Christopher's knee.

"And in her voice," Nicholas went on, "in her voice most of all, there was that cool, luminous candour that penetrated all things. Even the dusk of my complacency. She only said: You do love yourself as Warwick, don't you, Nicholas darling? And I knew she had caught and inexorably indexed every one of my secret, gloating glances into the mirror while we had been talking, and every studiedly careless posturing on the wobbly wooden chair. And in one searing, iconoclastic flash I knew and recognised for what it was worth the whole smug sequence, the whole flimsy edifice of facile tricks and gestures that were the very warp and woof of my Warwick. I faced the glass squarely for the first time in months, years: I peeled off my wig and wiped away the make-up. I suppose that kind of symbolism had become instinctive in me now. And then I looked at the limp, empty scalp and the greasy smear on the rag and thought: *Sic transit*—

It was a relief somehow. I must have been half-aware of it all the time, really, only it isn't so easy not to puff and strut while the customers applaud. When I looked up again into the glass I saw her reflection there with mine. She knew I hadn't just been removing a wig and make-up. She knew. She looked a little scared and yet elated at what she'd done for me. I turned suddenly and took her and kissed her. But she didn't respond. When I let her go at last she said: It's too late, Nicholas. I'm a dead woman. I'm no good to you now. No good to anyone. Not even Charles. . . . I said: But the dead can't revivify, my darling, as you have. She passed her hand over the greasy smear on the rag and held up the poor futile wig by a single hair so that it spun slowly upon itself in a ponderous, desultory way, this way and that—just as I had played him. Then, as she watched it crazily twisting she said: There's your Warwick. All that's left of him. . . . And again: I can only destroy. I can only destroy. . . . I snatched the thing from her and flung it away. Of course you must destroy, I said, before you can regenerate. But she just went on staring as though it were still there, twisting and turning back on itself. It's no use, she said. I'm good for nothing else. I can only destroy, destroy. . . . She was obsessed."

"Destroy," Christopher repeated. "Destroy, like Medea." The nebulous, intangible outlines of the idea first conceived within Grossman's dusty twilight theatre were becoming clearer and harder.

"Obsessed," Nicholas swept on. "I took her into my arms again, to awaken her, but she only said: It's no use, Nicholas. It's too late now. It could so easily have been, like all the other things. But it's too late now. She was already through the door and into the corridor when I called after her: Why did you come, then? She stopped, and with her back still towards me she confessed in a small reluctant voice: Because I couldn't keep away. And

fled. But long before I had caught up with her out in the High Street and brought her back, I knew that Charles had lost her. By the end of the week—”

But he had fallen abruptly into silence. His mind was focusing once more upon the wet grass and the dripping pines of Cæsar's Camp, and Una keeping tryst with him, Una gloveless and empty-handed: I've come. And I'm not going back. . . . And the stream, and the far-off hills of Connemara blueness: the glade of silver birches where she had yielded up her secret as she had in childhood to Christie in the chalk-pit: But you understand. You understand. . . . And his confident, light-hearted, uncomprehending acceptance. And afterwards his betrayal. Street-lamps and litter-boxes and villas and elderly ladies with dogs.

He spoke again to cover his thoughts, and his tone had tightened and hardened to flippancy. He burrowed an elbow deeper into the mound of hospital pillows and remarked trivially: “She'd left the traditional note behind on the pin-cushion for Charles, of course. I think he was quite relieved about it all, really.”

And so the salmon had leaped again. But now Christopher could recognise the subterfuge, sense the omission it covered and respect it.

He rose to go.

“By the way,” said Nicholas appreciatively, “the hospital psychiatrist was up to see me. We had a cosy little chat about greyhounds. But I can talk to you.”

“Also by the way;” Christopher responded, treasuring the tribute with his shy, withdrawn pride, “also by the way, what are you going to say in court?”

“The plain truth, as far as I'm capable of telling it,” Nicholas admitted. “Not out of any particular regard for it, God help me, but it always saves trouble in the long run.”

They let him go, committed to Christopher's care. And so Nicholas returned one evening across the hillside to the pleasantly inhabited terrace, upon whose leisurely, palpitating organism he had once turned his back in valediction.

Christopher stopped their taxi at the usual place, and they set off together across the grass. "You don't mind walking the last few hundred yards, do you?" he apologised. "It's a habit I've got into."

The candid sun was high above the foliage of Regent's Park, and a flock of small, jostling clouds dappled with swift shadows the cool, pale brilliance of the afternoon. It was wide-eyed April rather than July.

They stopped beneath the hawthorns for Christopher to show off his treasure, but the soft, confused rumour of the habitation came out to Nicholas once more and distracted his attention—the footsteps and the slammed doors, the bursts of music and conversation, even the snip-snip-snip of garden shears, and in the distance the little dog barking still.

He watched a curtain fluttering here and there from an open window. Someone, someone else, someone quite different, was playing Sinding in lush, rapturous ripples; someone very, very young, and dreaming still of thrushes singing in wet lilac. Upstairs in Christie's living-room he'd enjoy crunching hot buttered toast to it. Someone very young. Perhaps the fluffy-haired schoolgirl, unless she was on her way home with a bulging leather satchel and a ponderously encased tennis racquet, pushing a bike with a punctured tyre, her flaxen glory totally eclipsed by a hideously upturned receptacle of a school hat. Someone very young, or someone who hadn't ever quite grown up. But it wasn't the plump little Jewish matriarch either. There she was, tectering home up the steps, a confectioner's square white carton elegantly dangling from

her kid-gloved finger. Nicholas could scarcely wait for the front of his dolls' house to be lifted off. "Let's go in," he clamoured. "Let's go in."

But she had already vanished.

Nicholas looked about him, at the hall porter busy with the back page of his late luncheon edition, at the rose-tinted mirrors and the scarlet fire-extinguishers. He stared down at his muted feet upon the rubber flooring. None of these things belonged to his dolls' house.

"I was afraid you'd be disappointed with the inside," Christopher remarked triumphantly. And as they shot upwards in the lift he began to explain about the curving staircase and the candelabra.

But Nicholas was wondering how could one darn socks and dry one's hair and lay homely supper-tables on hygienic rubber flooring furnished with fire-extinguishers. It might have been the hospital or the court-room he had just come from.

On the landing Christopher produced his latchkey. "Well, here we are," he said. Inside he hung up his hat, replaced his umbrella in the stand and smoothed his gloves away in the drawer. Nicholas was already at the window. The gentle rumour of the place was wafting up from a hundred others below. In his delight he opened the window wider and the sashes squeaked. He had made his contribution. He belonged.

Christopher was filling the kettle for tea.

"You'll find some letters for you on the mantelpiece," he said. "One seems to be from the Saturn, and one I know is from my mother. She wants us to go down to her for the week-end."

XII

MISS MATTHEWS went no more to the staid City office. The more she thought of her City gentleman, the nice steady job and the regular hours, the more savagely she called herself a fool. Soft, that's what she was. After the way the Boss had treated her, too. Fifteen years' devoted service and then the sack. Just like that. And he'd tried to get her back again. Buy her back. Typical, that. But she wasn't having any. Knew his methods too well. And yet here she was, back again, working early and late, trying to get him out of the mess he'd got himself into—and [wondering why. Two whole weeks and not one word had been said about salary or even reinstatement. And she'd said good-bye, good-bye with a vengeance to the City. Proper mess she was in now, and no mistake.

Habit. That's what it was. Sir John's contract, and Dame Georgiana's solicitors, and the option on the Orpheum, and all the hundred and one other irons in the fire she'd left him with. They'd claimed her, the minute she put her nose round the door. Habit. Or had he been pulling the wool over her eyes with all that blubbering? Caught her in a weak moment, perhaps. She'd never in all her fifteen years seen him work that one before, though. And all that talk about grief. That was a new one too. Grief.

She glanced uneasily across at the still, slumped bulk of him propped between his capacious chromium and leather chair and his hospital stretcher of a desk. The

letter she had placed before him a quarter of an hour ago was lying there untouched.

"Is that about what you wanted me to say to Boults?" she asked. But there was no response. Nothing seemed to disturb that curious inward stare behind the heavy, half-closed lids. That was new too.

She tried again: "Mr. Grossman, that letter to Boults. Is that what you wanted to say?" She came round behind the desk at last and touched his stranded, listless hand.

"That you, Maidie?" he said.

"Yes, Mr. Grossman."

"Something to sign, eh?"

"I don't know if it's quite what you'd want to say—"

"You know best, Maidie. You know best." And he pushed the signed letter across to her.

"Mr. Grossman," she said resolutely, "I don't like to see you like this. You've been like it a whole fortnight now, you know."

"I've been doing a bit of thinking lately, Maidie."

"Thinking? Mr. Grossman, don't you think you'd better let a doctor see you?"

"Doctor? Not in their line, grief."

"Now, don't get me wrong, Mr. Grossman, please. I'm not suggesting you're potty or anything like that, not for one moment I'm not. But don't you think you ought to go to one of those psychiatrists?"

"They're all right for the films, Maidie. They're all right for the films."

"I don't know what you come in for at all, I'm sure," she lamented. "You just sit in here all day and never see a soul except me."

"What's wrong with that?"

"It isn't like you, that's all. And it's as much as I can do to get you to take a sandwich at lunch-time."

"You're a good girl, Maidie. You're a good girl."

"No, I'm not," she muttered rebelliously to herself. "I'm a bloody fool, that's what I am."

But aloud she said: "All the same, Mr. Grossman, I do wish you'd let a doctor see you or something, really I do."

"Listen, Maidie, I'll tell you something 'cos you're a good girl, sec? You're a good girl."

"Yes, Mr. Grossman?"

"I been doing a lot of thinking 'cos there's something I gotta figure out."

"Yes, Mr. Grossman?"

"About her."

"Yes, Mr. Grossman?"

"It was you told me first. Said she never looked right with me, like Dulcie and the others did. Said there was something wrong between us. Something wrong."

Maidie stirred uncomfortably. "Oh, I wouldn't go so far as to say that, Mr. Grossman! She was different. That's all. Just different."

"Well, that's what I gotta figure out."

"Did you get that tombstone fixed?" Maidie enquired solicitously.

"Tombstone?"

"Don't you remember? You were just crazy to order one. Something classy in white marble you said. Got me 'phoning and writing all day for catalogues."

"Catalogues?"

"Where are they? Didn't you show them to Mr. Hayward after all?"

"Oh, yeah. Yeah. Took them over myself. I remember now. Told him he could put 'em all in the waste-paper basket. Put 'em all in the waste-paper basket."

"Well! Why ever did you do that?"

For a moment the apathy fell from him and he even struck the desk with the flat of his hand as he spoke:

"There's something I gotta figure out, I tell you! And raising a tombstone's no way to do it."

So Maidie went back to her work. She had brought her typewriter into his room, partly because in her single-handed struggle to cope with his neglected affairs she found it necessary to refer to him constantly, though usually in vain, but mainly because she felt uneasy about leaving him alone in his room for any length of time. Every morning she systematically searched his drawers and surreptitiously his overcoat pockets for tablets or a revolver, and each time she was called away from his room on her return she instinctively braced herself against the possibility of finding him dead in his chair.

There was no one with whom she could share her anxieties and the intolerable burden of responsibility she had so surprisingly and yet so naturally assumed, for she sensed and respected the Boss's dread of admitting his present plight to his staff outside, and did all she could to keep up his pitious pretence that nothing was wrong. She herself gave the elderly clerk whatever instructions seemed to her to be necessary and even bravely handled interviews with the more important callers who could no longer be fobbed off with excuses. Mr. Grossman was in conference. Mr. Grossman was on the 'phone to Paris, New York, Los Angeles. Mr. Grossman was even reading a new play and must on no account be disturbed. This was her last resort for the outside office.

But the strain was beginning to tell on her. You could do anything for a limited period, she told herself, but this state of affairs looked like going on forever. If only a limit could be set. A week, a month. August, September. She might even manage to keep going until Christmas. But not indefinitely, not without knowing how long. Or they'd both end up in the nuthouse.

She glanced across at him. He seemed brighter. Not

that funny inward sort of stare any more. He was looking straight at her.

"Mr. Grossman, I wish you'd give me your answer about Medea. I told you they'd got out the figures for me and it's another couple of hundred down this week."

He was still looking at her, kindly, almost tenderly.

"You don't look so good, Maidie," he said at last. "I guess you been working too hard."

"Please, Mr. Grossman," she pleaded with gentle exasperation. "Shall we take it off?"

"Been losing weight, too, haven't you?" he went on.

"Oh, never mind me!" she exclaimed. "We've got to get this settled. Shall Medea come off?"

"But I don't like to see you make yourself ill, Maidie," he persisted softly. "I guess it's time you took a holiday." He wrote out a blank cheque. "Fix yourself up somewhere nice with this," he said.

She took it and without looking at it tore it up and dropped the pieces into her waste-paper basket. "Mr. Grossman," she said, "I'm taking Medea off at the end of next week. And I'm telling them to go ahead with that new musical."

"O.K.," he said. "O.K."

She sighed, but without relief, and fell once more to drumming out her overwrought feelings in a burst of clattering, impotent efficiency upon the keys of her typewriter. When it had eventually dwindled into silence, he remarked:

"I got a hunch I might figure it out down in that village of hers, with the strawberries and cream on the lawn and the harvest homes and the Christmas carols."

"Figure what out?" she snapped across at him. For a new dread had fallen upon her. Strawberries and cream, harvest homes, Christmas carols—what had he to do with them? What was it all about now? Suppose, suppose he

turned violent. She glanced across at the door to the outside office. No, the way was clearer through to her own room, and the key on the right side of the door, too. She'd lock the door behind her, warn the outside office on the house 'phone and then call the ambulance.

"Figure out what I told you I gotta figure out," he pursued reproachfully. "The truth about her and me."

"Oh, yes," she agreed absently, her pent-up panic beginning to subside. "Oh, yes."

"I'll go down there this afternoon. That's what I'll do."

"You'll want a bag packed and taken down to Waterloo," she said instantly, her hand on the 'phone. "And I'll find you out a train. Unless you'd like me to order the car for you. I suppose you've replaced it? The one that got smashed up."

"No, not yet."

If anyone knew how to get himself a new car quick these days, he did. But she bit back the retort and said gently: "We must see about getting you one, Mr. Grossman. I expect you're lost without it."

"Lost," he repeated after her, fondling the word. "That's what I am. Lost."

And she knew he wasn't thinking about the car. Anxiously she watched him heave himself to his feet and trudge across to the door for his hat and coat. Here was a man who would never learn how to walk by himself. She could feel, as she watched his tread, all the weight of his loneliness. At the door she stopped him, her hand on his arm. "I'll get them for you," she said. She returned and helped him on with his coat as she had done hundreds of times before in the course of her duties, but now her new-sprung compassion went out to him, enfolding, investing him with fresh strength.

He turned slowly to face her, the dull, limp hair patted and cajoled into regulation rolls, the painted, ageing skin,

the slackening contours and the tired, anxious eyes, late-kindling: he faced her in wondering, uncomprehending recognition.

"You're a good girl, Maidie," he said at last. "Will you marry me?"

She heard him perfectly, but couldn't take it in. All she felt was a great, surging relief. She needn't search his drawers or his pockets any more, or fear for him alone in his flat or wherever he spent his long nights. She no longer dreaded what he might do to himself down there in that unknown country village at the end of his journey. All the fears that had oppressed her were suddenly lifted clean away.

"Will you, Maidie?" he was saying.

Never at a loss for smooth, stop-gap words, she heard herself reply with nervous garrulity: "Oh, Mr. Grossman, I'm ever so busy just now, really I am. Couldn't you leave it over until you get back from the country?"

In the train he slept, content at last to be on his way. He was bound for somewhere. He had a destination.

They recognised him when he got out at the country station and offered to 'phone for a taxi for him, as they had done before. But he declined. Do him good, the walk, he told them. What about his bag? Yes, it was kind of heavy. Would he like it sent up to the Chequers? No, he didn't know where he'd be staying yet. Wanted to have a look round first. Leave his bag at the station and maybe have it sent up later. Right-oh, sir, and a nice afternoon for a stroll it was turning out too, with the shower passed over and the sun coming out again. First to the left off the main road, past the brick bungalow and straight on. Couldn't mistake it. Whose bungalow was it? Curious he should ask that, now. Very curious.

Used to be hers. Where she lived as a child. The poor young lady as drove the gentleman's motor over the chalk-pit. Funny thing, but her mother died violent too. Caught her clothes afire and— Yes, he knew about all that, the gentleman from London, or would it be New York? Good afternoon, sir. Good afternoon.

He set off along the glistening, steaming tarmac, between the lank, unruly hedgerows. Grown too much in the last week or two, he reflected. Must be the weather. Hanging down over the roadway now, and all overgrown with a sickly, weedy-looking flower. Reminded him of that cheap, white, starry-looking stuff she'd bought off the barrows. In place of his orchids. Orchids. Orchids on a coffin. Orchids on a coffin. He could still hear the mocking beat of those wheels on the metals. That guy *Quin!* *Quin.*

He took a deep breath and smelt the rain on the warm earth. That took him back a bit. Too far to remember. Must have been in a park somewhere. He'd never known the kind of folks that kept gardens. Or thought to buy himself one, till now. He took another breath. She must have smelt it like this too. She'd lived here. Right here.

But the brick bungalow was disappointing. It was neither the manorial residence nor the rustic cottage which had alternated in his twopence coloured imagination. Just plain mediocre. Exactly as she had described it in that take-it-or-leave-it, couldn't-care-less sort of tone. And he'd refused to believe it. Hens and washing at the back and a tuft of pampas grass in the front. On the bright green gate a brass plate announced the profession of the present occupant—District Nurse. No shady, ancestral lawn, no clipped hedges, no hum of bees. Only a patch of straggling cabbages flanked by an eruption of nasturtiums hopelessly out of control. The culminating disappointment was the ugly, naked sash windows, each

with its blind-cord and tassel hanging taut as a plumb-line. He had always liked to think of her at an open lattice, looking down. Just like the Principal Girl in Jack and the Beanstalk.

A woman walked by. She was pushing two robust children in an ill-used pram whose spidery wheels cried out for oil. She stared at him all the while so fixedly that as she came up with and passed him her head screwed automatically farther and farther over her shoulder; and when at last it would turn no more she let go the pram, leaving it stranded in the middle of the lane, and trotted back to him.

"Do you want her?" she enquired, in a hushed, urgent whisper.

"Want her?"

"The Nurse. She's up at Mrs. Hurst's. Her husband was took poorly."

"No," he said. "I don't want the Nurse."

"Oh," she said, crestfallen, "then I'd best be getting along." But she stayed, looking at him with the same naïvely virulent curiosity as her two open-mouthed, pop-eyed children behind her: for this was the Rich Gentleman Friend from London who Was Present at the Funeral.

"Yeah," he said shortly, "I guess you had."

So she wheeled the pram reluctantly on, turning to stare back at him from time to time, and its rhythmic squeakings reproached him with the barrow he'd pushed in Bruddersfield.

Old Clo' Moses. That's what he was still. Even here. In spite of the change of name and fortune. In spite of the Liverpool warehouse, the Atlantic crossing, the downtown movie-theatre and the Broadway enterprises. In spite of the West End office and the Albany apartment. In spite of the Rolls and the chauffeur and the secretary

Just as well it was all smashed up and they weren't with him now to witness his secret humiliation.

The secretary? Well, no, not the secretary. Maidie'd understand. The way she had when she'd helped him on with his overcoat. Kind of wrapped him in it. Enfolded. Like that shawl. It was warm walking and though it was only a light summer coat he could do more comfortably without it. But he kept it on. It felt good the way she'd put it on him. Yeah, Maidie'd understand all right.

He left the brick bungalow behind and continued his walk along the lane to the village. Scandalous the way that white weed had been allowed to run riot. He wished he had a stick so's he could lash out at it a bit the way the kids did at the dandelion heads on the plot of waste ground at the end of the Bruddersfield tram-lines. Bruddersfield. Damn that pram and its squeaking, tale-bearing wheels! He could confide it all to Maidie, but never to her. Never to her. What was it that had always been between them? What was it that hadn't been right?

There was the Chequers. A whole hour before opening time it looked dead and empty and forbidding. Besides, he'd had enough of hotels and roadhouses. A hotel was no place to find out about her.

He walked on. Across the square. Beneath the great sycamore that sheltered the market-cross. Past the bow-fronted Post Office where you could buy picture post-cards and corn plasters too. Past Ye Anciente Half-Timbered House and the junk-shop beside it. He turned and looked incredulously back at it all, silent and deserted. Real people never lived here. It was surely a set he'd strayed on to, a set for Goody-Two-Shoes. In contradiction a 'bus disturbed the quietude, circled the great tree and drew up beside him to discharge its tea-time load of whooping grammar-school children. It never occurred to him to look for Una among them.

He turned down a narrow, high-walled lane to avoid them. The lane widened and the old flint walls gave way to the clipped hedges he remembered from before. And behind them stretched the shady lawns and the flowerbeds, borders they called them, full of stately blooms like duchesses, and gentler ones that relaxed a bit and swayed about, and bright, perky little ones to the fore. Candytuft and Sweet William and Columbine and Larkspur. Hollyhock and Sweet Sultan and Cherry Pie and Love-in-a-Mist. He'd heard people speak of them from time to time, but couldn't pick them out. Columbine, Larkspur, Candytuft. And honey-bees humming. Humming.

A lady was coming towards him down the grass edge of the border. A lady in a lilac smock and gardening gloves. A lady with silvery hair and a kind face. A sudden longing sprang up like a squall within him and overcame him.

"Hey, ma'am, will you let me a room?" he called across the clipped hedge.

She looked up with well-bred incredulity. "I beg your pardon?" she said.

"I wanna room."

"Have you tried the Chequers?"

"I wanna a room right here."

Her expression did not change so much as set. "I think there must be some mistake," she said.

"I'll give you five pound a night."

"I don't let rooms," she said, finally, unequivocally.

"O.K., ma'am," he fired back, "I'll make it ten."

But already her back was turned upon him. She was departing. Abandoning him. He panicked.

"Lady, lady," he cried after her, "take me in! Take me in! I gotta find out what it's like to live here! I gotta find out what it's like."

But she only moved away up the herbaceous border,

graciously, callously, with her shallow flower-basket and her garden scissors, serenely snip-snipping as she went. And he was glad in the end she hadn't taken pity on him, because he didn't fancy at all the way her chosen victims fell one by one neatly, submissively, into her basket. She, too, seemed to know all about Bruddersfield.

So he went on down the lane which he knew led to the church. There seemed no place else to look for Una but where she lay.

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The church stood apart from its village, observing, recording, commenting on its tablets of stone. Chipped, overgrown, weatherbeaten, they yet formed a comprehensive card index for all to see. He read of Sir John and his lady, at rest in their great stone sepulchre these two hundred years, and of their henchmen and handmaidens, the Hursts, whose last remaining descendant was even then waiting on his sick-bed to join them, the District Nurse from the brick bungalow in attendance. He read of the Rodmells, the Chaileys, the Fristons and the Haywards. The Haywards. That must be young Christie's father. And that his father's father. And there was her mother, the one with the flowers that might have come straight out of the old Duchess's shallow basket. Candytuft and Larkspur and Columbine: he wished he knew which was which. An irreverent bee fumbled tipsily about them for honey.

They were all there, the village names, cosily gathered in the evening sunshine about the west door. But whereabouts was it they had stood in the driving rain just a month ago? The four of them. He and Christie and that high-hat husband of hers, and Quin. Quin with that nasty smile of his that needed wiping off his face. Quin who'd driven her—Quin. But had it been Quin? Or was it

what Maidie had seen? That something wrong between them. That something wrong.

He shivered. In spite of the walk and the warm afternoon, in spite of the overcoat Maidie had wrapped him in, he shivered. He had wandered into shadow. All the cold, flint bulk of the church stood between him and the sun, and here the churchyard narrowed to a strip of dank grass and nettles that flourished in macabre exuberance. Even the headstones were stained a hectic green. Over in the corner was a rubbish tip piled with rotting wreaths. His wreath, his orchids, festering.

The place seemed familiar. He remembered in the downpour there had been two headstones, side by side, leaning opposite ways. There they were, and beside them a mound of drying clay. It was covered by a great sheaf of the white hedge-weed, freshly gathered.

Hedge-weed. They'd laid her cold in the shadow, among the nettles and the long grass, they'd mocked at his orchids and cast them out to fester, and now, now they'd heaped her grave with weed, common white weed from the straggling highway hedges.

He'd show them! He'd buy her a plot in the sun, even if it meant turning those others out, and raise over it a gilt and marble sepulchre that would put Sir John and his lady in the shade. He'd show them!

He began by removing the hedge-flowers and trampling them underfoot. He did it very thoroughly and passionately, rather like an ageing stallion trampling for the last time a rival. He'd show them! But as he turned, grumbling with his exertions, to pitch them out on to the rubbish-heap, he was grasped by the lapels of his coat and a clenched fist hit him square on the jaw. He collapsed quietly, like a sack of flour.

"You and your bloody orchids!" panted Nicholas as Christopher, too late, held him back.

When Grossman opened his eyes again, a moment or two later, the first thing he saw was the trampled mass of white hedge-flowers still clasped in his arms. White, starry-looking stuff. Like she'd bought off the barrows. In place of his orchids. In place of his orchids. . . .

Painfully he peered up at Christopher and Nicholas and from where he lay, wedged fast in the crutch of the opposite-inclined headstones, he murmured: "Yeah, I see what you mean. I see what you mean."

XIII

BETWEEN THEM they shoved and hoisted him up on to his feet, but he still sagged at the knees, so they lowered him on to the grass again, where he sat with his legs straight out before the flaccid bulk of him, holding his poor, pounding head in his hands. He felt weak and sick and very helpless. And his dentures kept shifting about. "I see what you mean," he repeated over and over again—he'd found something and was clinging to it—"I see what you mean."

Nicholas dusted his hands together symbolically. "I never did such a thing before," he explained with glossy diffidence, "and I hope never to again, please God. For it's not my way at all." His voice now had a truer ring to it, although what he actually said didn't sound as convincing to Christopher as the last time he'd heard Nicholas say it.

Grossman looked up at him. The pain was passing from his head and he became aware that Christopher was trying to relieve him of the trampled hedge-flowers with which he was still absurdly festooned. But he clung to them. "I hadn't got it figured out, although I guess I knew it all along," he said. "So I got you all wrong." And he told them the truth about the orchids she'd turned out of her rooms and the cheap, white, starry-looking stuff she'd bought instead off the barrows. "And the same goes for the furs and the jewels," he assured them conscientiously. "I guess it's a habit I got into—talking different to what I know when I wanna feel good."

"I've done the same," Christopher responded. "We all do. And then the cock crows." He glanced at Nicholas. "Or Phyllis puts her head round the door."

But Nicholas wasn't even listening. Intoxicated by the setting as much as by the situation, he turned once more upon Grossman. "You ruined her!" he thundered cheaply. "You ruined her!"

Still clasping his trampled garlands to him, Grossman wanly shook his head.

"I guess not," he said. "I can see now she wouldn't have touched my kind, not with a pitchfork, if she hadn't been ruined already."

And once more the latent dignity of the man, enthroned in his unexpected humility, saved him from a further onslaught. Nicholas also recognised it, and the fight went out of him, too.

Grossman propped his back against a headstone. "Broken," he pursued, "that's what she was by the time she came to me. Broken. I guess it wasn't her at all I knew. Only what was left of her. Yeah, she came to me. I couldn't believe it when they showed her in, not after the way she'd steered clear of me all these years. As luck would have it I'd nothing for her just then, but I was scared of losing her again if I let her go, so I took her out to lunch. She tried her best not to come. No harm in lunch, baby, I said. Then she acted strange. Seemed to be making up her mind about something. Something bigger than lunch with me. She looked pinched and hungry but she ate next to nothing, and the drinks seemed to go to her head. I'll be all right in the air, she said, I'll be all right in the air. So we drove to Regent's Park and sat out on deck chairs watching the ducks. But never a smile could I get out of her. She looked like she'd just done a murder. And she had, too. I can see that now. I edged my chair a bit closer and, whang, I went on the

grass—just like I am now. It collapsed, you see. She began to laugh, a lazy gurgling kind of laugh at first, and I laughed too. But she went on and on. I never heard a woman laugh like it. Not over a corney gag like that. Honey, I said, you're a sick woman. That stopped her. Honey, I said, you're a sick woman and I'm gonna see you get well again. You? she said. You? I never saw her laugh again. Just that queer, silent smile of hers. And that dumb little voice. So dumb it made you wonder if she was on the level. And that way she'd look at me sometimes, as though I'd struck her. Me!"

He looked across at Nicholas, but he had turned away.

Grossman went on: "That's the way she looked right at the last, in the hotel garden at Hindhead. I saw her watching a butterfly, a little blue one. Pretty little thing it was. I waited for it to settle and then made a grab at it. I got it. Only when I opened up my hand to give it to her it was ground to powder. I can see now it kind of meant something to her, that dab of blue powder still fluttering a bit in the palm of my hand. But she never said a word. Just left me out there, dusting it off my hand with my handkerchief, and went indoors. And a minute later I heard my car being driven off, flat out. I never thought to tell about the butterfly at the inquest. I never thought about it at all till now."

"They wouldn't have seen the connection," Christopher assured him.

Nicholas swung round upon them both.

"I killed her!" he shouted, declaiming at large. "I killed her, I whom she trusted with her cargo of dreams. I took them and broke them in pieces. Her world, her other world beyond the curtain of the mist, her world of blue hills looming, it's I that wouldn't keep it as we saw it, as it was: it's I that made of it a stinking 'bus route with street-lamps and litter-boxes and elderly ladies

with dogs. That's what I did to her." He looked straight down at Grossman leaning wearily against his headstone. "And that was the worst thing of all, God help me!"

Under the blind, frenetic scrutiny Grossman lifted a hand to shade his bewildered eyes. "Pardon me," he ventured apologetically, "if I say I don't quite follow about the litter-boxes and the dames with dogs."

Nicholas's sudden flurry of rhetoric subsided. He withdrew into his armour of brittle mock-materialism. "Old man," he sneered, "I'll speak to you in your own language: I'd a swell part with everything my own way, see, on a nice, cushy circuit, with a growing public, the West End just around the corner, and good, regular money coming in steadily every Friday. I'd forgotten she existed even, but one evening she came and took it all away from me at one fell swoop. Nicholas darling, she said in that dumb little voice of hers, so dumb it left you in no doubt at all whether she was on the level or not, you do love yourself as Warwick, don't you?"

"Nicholas," said Christopher, "take off that wig and wipe the make-up off your face."

"Oh, God," cried Nicholas, deflated, "I never asked to be believed in! I never asked to be believed in, did I?"

"She was the rainbow woman," Christopher said.

"... that woman aint real," quoted Nicholas softly. "You take care. That woman will make you do what you never intended. Thats the rainbow woman."

"That goes for you too, Grossman," Christopher remarked, "but not for me. I've never yet been able to do what I never intended."

But Grossman was looking up at Nicholas. "I always said you'd got something, sort," he reproached him. "Didn't I, Christie? Only you've always been such an awkward kind of a guy I never thought you'd ever get

any place with it. And she always figured you would. Well, time will show. Time will show."

"And I," said Christopher elegiacally, "I had all the time in the world. Here in our village I had the summer and the winter, the sowing and the reaping; and afterwards I had the crest of the wave and the depths of it too. And I let it all go by. I just stood and watched it, until it came to an end. It seemed eternal, and then suddenly there was nothing any more."

Grossman heaved one of his cataclysmic sighs. His damaged dentures were troubling him still. "Help me up, Christie lad," he said. "Help me up."

He struggled to his feet and shuffled about a bit on the gravel path to get the feel of them again. Then, when he was more sure of his balance, he stooped to gather up the garland of hedge-flowers.

"Well, there it is," he said, "I had her, but never in the way I wanted her. And it's only now she's gone, through her going, I know the way it was."

He laid the white flowers on the dump with the others.

"She won't be needing these any more," he observed, looking about him at the other two. "Or any marble angels either. I guess she's made us her memorial. We ain't the same three guys now that stood out here in the rain and then travelled back to town on the two-fifty. We ain't the same three guys at all."

No one remembered there had been four of them. No one even noticed Charles's absence. Long before he was dead there was nothing left of him.

"She has sent me down to hell and back again," Nicholas began noisily, like a Chorus. "We are her memorial, and when we leave this place we take her with us." Privately he was wondering whether he ought to accept that Oscar Wilde part at the Saturn or return at last to Dublin, to Dublin and himself. He'd ask Christie's

advice at supper—it was hardly the moment now—and excite that imperturbable mother of his, a real live stage actor talking shop.

It began to rain again. Grossman shuffled his feet. "Well," he said, "well, I guess we said all we gotta say."

"Where do we go from here?" said Christopher. There was only old Palethorpe in front of him, with his cross-words and his eternal little joke and his "Well done, dear boy." Junior Partner, Senior Partner, Retired Partner, Deceased Partner. And in protest the clear, pure outlines of his dream set for Medea, for Hamlet, for— But what was the use? He'd only go on standing aside, watching it all go by. Whatever was left to go by. He gave a last glance at the mound of clay. "You've beaten me to it, young fellah," Grossman had said to him. And he thought of the dab of blue powder fluttering on Grossman's palm. "You can grab as I have, but it don't always mean that you've got it, see?" And Una: "Neither of us will ever go out into nothingness. We *did* things, didn't we? Things that go marching on."

Grossman was thinking already of Maidie, and the answer she would give him on Monday, maybe tonight if he could make it. She'd be working late as usual, bless her. He wouldn't even wait to get his dentures fixed. She'd understand, see to it for him. He'd get the next train back. Just as well he'd left that bag at the station.

"Where do we go from here?" he repeated. "Home, I guess. Home." And he lingered fondly over the unfamiliar word. "There's no sense in standing about in the damp."

